Summary

I, I am clearly broken and no one knows what to do
Pieces of the puzzle don't fit, so, I pound them into you
Itching is the pulse inside
Creeping out to come alive
It's just doing what it's gonna do

Loki is an Avenger now, but so far, business is slow.
But of course, that's only a matter of time..
Chapter 1

“Pepper? Why does everyone think I’m fucking Steve?!”

Pepper blinked and slowly lifted her eyes from her laptop screen, looking over at where Tony stood at his apartment workstation, hands waving at the screen and wearing his ‘I am going to blow up the universe’ face. “Run that by me again?”

He looked at her. “Everyone seems under the impression that Ironman and Captain America are fucking. What the hell?”

She managed not to burst into laughter. “Get off Facebook, Tony.”

“You knew about this didn’t you.” He rubbed his eyes.

“Oh please, this has been all over the internet since New York. Hell even you think he’s hot.”

“I know lesbians that think Steve is hot and that is SO not the point because Steve could not be straighter. NASA could use his straightness to calibrate equipment.” Tony pouted.

Outside the Avengers Tower, snow came down in thick blankets. Since blowing the hell out of some Florida everglades, things have been fairly quiet really, just the usual local troublemakers needing the occasional bitchslap to mind their place. Loki and Thor were not just getting along, they’d borrowed the plane and gone to visit Jane together. A week-long trip had turned into two weeks, littered with random phone calls and text messages and hey Tony can I buy Thor a motorcycle on this expense card? And Tony had been pouting for days now because dammit he wanted some quality time with his boyfriend.

Also now a permanent installation in the tower was Phil Coulson, whose first name was definitely not Agent anymore. On the other hand, Phil seemed to pride himself on being his own special brand of enigma. Tony still knew next to nothing about him. His music tastes were eclectic but mostly old school (big band, lounge, jazz). He drank Tequila and Vodka like water and knew how to make martinis that Tony had never heard of. He kept strange hours and did god knows what in his office. He also seriously creeped out Loki, which was hilarious unto itself.

“Like that stops people from fantasizing about it.” Pepper was back in her laptop. “Your sudden decision to be more close-mouthed about your love life has left a lot of gossip columnists with less to do. So they’re making shit up. I read it all for laughs.”

Tony sighed and scrolled the touch screen. “They think he lives with us.”
“Well, to be fair, they aren’t wrong.” After all, the building was still the property of Tony and Pepper, even if several floors were now farmed out to Avengers.

“Right ideas, wrong Avenger. Which is silly, considering how many pictures the paparazzi have gotten of Loki and me out and about.”

Tony and Bruce locked themselves into the lab at regular intervals as they tried to reinvent the laptop and smart phone. At one point in time, STARK had made a hardened laptop (a tough book competitor) for the Military that was known as the AK line. Ass Kicker, or Armored Kinetics, depending whether you asked Tony or STARK marketing. The last of the AK line had been made six years ago, and interestingly enough, Phil had one of them, the AK007 line (which, naturally, had been made for intelligence agencies primarily). He was steadfastly refusing to let Tony touch it or upgrade it, which had made Tony light on the idea of bringing the tough laptops back.

“And while you’re at it, make your phones useful.” Phil had said in a snide voice. When Tony had given him a look, Phil had taken one out of his pocket, twisted it between his hands, and shattered it.

“You have some serious build quality issues, Anthony.”

He hadn’t even argued the use of his full name because, well, Phil had a point.

But, back to the topic. Tony and Bruce locked themselves in the lab, and Loki dragged them out at regular intervals. Sent them to bed, made sure they ate, and sometimes just drug them outside to force them to be normal social human beings, which was funny in a bitter way when you took into account that Loki was the one with an insanity that affected his social interactions. They went to coffee shops and talked shop there just for the environment. They went out to eat. Hell, they went to the mall just to watch Bruce be awkward and awestruck because he actually had felt safe about being there.

All of this had led to a rather large number of pictures of the Science Triplets on the internet.

“We could just give up and tell the press, you know.” He finally said, making an effort to ignore the idiots on the internet and actually get some work done.

Pepper gave him a look, pursing her lips slightly. “I like the illusion of privacy we have.”

Tony burst into laughter, because goddamn, how accurate was that?

Later that day, Jarvis popped into the lab, straightened his tie, and told Tony that the plane was touched down at the airport and was in the process of unloading. Jarvis’ holographic avatar had started showing up a few weeks after Florida, to various reactions from the group, but he just made Tony smile. Even if Jarvis had made himself tall and lanky and wasn’t that a bitch because that was what Tony was into these days (though, not so much blondes anymore).

The timing was good as well, Bruce and Tony had wrestled the hardware issues to the point they
were ready to knock out some test products but Loki had a much better eye for color and lines. Tony had made a lot of money for a long time building weapons (and some very sexy ones), but Loki made stuff normal people wanted to buy. As proven by opinion polls they sometimes threw on the website they now had. Say what you will, Loki had a sense of style.

So he got himself a reasonably healthy snack and went down to the ground floor to await the return of the Asgardian Wonder Twins, not surprised that in spite of weather that was flat out miserable the public was still there. Never one to do things halfway, Tony had declined to have a tree cut down for the lobby and had had a live tree brought in and planted into a repurposed floor level fountain… thing that usually had koi fish they were constantly having to remind people not to throw coins at. So the huge and very alive fir tree towered in the lobby, and filled it with a fresh woody smell that was either quite welcome or most hated, depending which staff you asked. Loki had done something magic related and now the branches were permanently coated in cold fresh snow that stubbornly refused to melt in the heat of the building, nicely setting off the decorations and lighting. Somehow a reproduction of Steve’s shield had become the star, which Tony found both appropriate, and non-religious enough for his liking.

The downside to this was that some form of press was always using it as a back drop so the minute he stepped out of the elevator, he was pounced on.

“Mr. Stark!”

“The answer is no.” He replied, claiming a bench to sit on and wait. “No comment, no questions, just no.”

The reporter, a woman, pouted, a camera man hovering over her shoulder. “Well can I at least know what brought you downstairs?”

“What, I can’t enjoy my damn tree?” That got the desired affect he was hoping for and the reporter sulked off, taking her camera man with her but they watched him from a distance, waiting to see if he was going to do anything newsworthy.

It was the music on the overhead that let him know that Loki and Thor were back, because it abruptly changed from holiday music to AC/DC’s ‘Back in Black,’ the volume increasing. That was enough to make most of the lobby denizens look up curiously, then everything stopped when the doors opened and the Asgardian brothers walked in, pushing their motorcycles into the lobby because why would they enter the parking garage the normal way? They were already pulling off their helmets, and Tony felt his heart skip a few beats as Loki threw his hair back out of his eyes.

Loki was in his motorcycle leathers, his long coat on over the sinful black leather pants, steadying the bike with one hand. He was still pale as the moon, tall thin and long dark hair, and easily Thor’s polar opposite. Thor, tall broad and golden, in motorcycle chaps and steadying a Harley with one hand. All in all, they looked absolutely unreal, and their laughter was loud in the room.

“Thank you for the welcome, Jarvis.” Loki remarked, brushing snow off.
“Motorcycles in this weather?” Tony wanted to know, walking over. “We have a parking garage.”

“Well, hello to you too.” Loki made a face. “Miss me?”

“You have five minutes to get upstairs or I am no longer responsible for my actions.” Tony deadpanned, then looked at Thor. “Hey, how’s Jane?”

“Jane is exceptional, Man of Iron, and she sends his regards.”

He honestly had to wonder if Thor heard half the things he said. Even Loki was choking back the laughter.

This was when the doors opened again, and in walked Phil and Steve, both in winter exercise gear. They’d taken up running together once a day, no matter what the weather was doing. Since Phil had rejoined the group, they’d somehow become very good friends.

“Hey, guys, welcome back.” Steve grinned, joining the impromptu gathering.

“Son of Coul!”

“Down, Thor. Down please. A little help here? Guys?” Everyone else was too busy laughing because Thor was a hugger and Phil’s feet were off the floor, looking for the entire world like a grouchy cat. Eventually he gave up and hugged back and it was only then that Thor relented and set him down with a laugh. Once his feet were on the ground Phil popped his neck, straightened himself out and he might have as well been in his suit because suddenly he was all authority and poise, turning on heel and leveling a finger at the reporter and her camera man. “You are aware that we now require a press pass for the lobby?”

“How the hell does he do that?” Loki wanted to know.

“Practice.” Phil replied over his shoulder, then he was smiling that strange gentle smile of his, stepping over to talk quietly to the slightly alarmed reporter.

Tony shook his head and looked at Loki and Thor. “Would you two put your bikes back downstairs. Then seriously, Loki, upstairs or I strip you right here. Pick a location.” Once Loki was laughing and heading for the freight elevator trailing Thor, he looked at Steve. “And would you kindly tell the nice reporter we’re not fucking? On film, even? Because I’m seriously a bit weirded out that people think that, and it’s not like they’re going to believe a word I say about it.”

“They think what.” Steve replied, flat.
“Yeah, man. I know.”

“That doesn’t feel like an appropriate thing to say to any press.”

Tony gesticulated at the reporter. “They’re talking about it anyway. Phrase it anyway you like!”

“Oh just.. fine. FINE. You’re welcome.”

“And thank you.” Tony grinned at him and headed for the elevator, whistling.

Pepper was upstairs in the apartment waiting for him. She’d been in a meeting, but had slipped out early when Jarvis had informed her (via projected words on the paperwork in front of her) that Loki was back. “Is it just me or is Jarvis getting more creative?”

Tony snickered and helped her take the suit jacket off, not that she needed the help but he gave it anyway. “I think he finally gets that he’s allowed to express himself.”

“I do beg your pardon, sir.” Jarvis said in the overhead, sounding more stiff than usual. Tony made a face at the ceiling.

“You know we love you.”

“Yes, yes I do.” Said Loki as he walked in, jacket flopped over his arm and smiling in his curly wicked way. “So, did you miss me?”

The two sets of hands immediately reaching for him were probably a ‘yes’, Loki mused.

Most of an hour later they were in a naked puppy pile on the bed. Pepper was mostly asleep, laying across Tony and resting her cheek on Loki’s back. Loki and Tony were at angles to each other, Tony on his back Loki on his stomach, faces nestled together.

“What’s going on in the lab?” Loki finally asked.

“We need you back in there. We want to put some test product together.” Tony yawned.

“If you two start talking math and ruin my afterglow I will kill you both.” Pepper mumbled.

Loki laughed. “How about my trip instead then, dear?”
“That’ll work.” She shifted, nuzzling one of his shoulder blades, tracing pale patterns onto Loki’s blue skin with one hand. “It’s good to see you getting along so well with Thor.”

“Well, I’m not sure about Darcy still, sometimes it seems like she wants to taser me, sometimes it seems like she’s checking me out.” Loki shifted, goosebumps rising under her fingertips. “But Jane seems to have accepted me, and Thor and I are getting along well these days. It’s not quite how it used to be, before, but even before I was playing games.”

“Better or worse than before?” Tony asked, watching his face. He was long used now to Loki being in their bed without his ‘human’ face on, the red eyes and dusky blue skin of a Jotun so bold against the sheets.

“Better.” Loki said after a moment. “We listen to each other better now.”

“And you apparently taught him to ride a motorcycle.” Pepper hums softly.

“He asked, actually. You know I took my bike with so I could get it on some open roads while he was spending some quality time with Jane, well about the third day of this he said he wanted to learn. He seemed horribly awkward on my sport bike, but happily Darcy had a friend who let us borrow his cruiser. That worked well enough I bought him one.”

“You do realize that Thor in chaps nearly killed the poor receptionist.” Tony smirked.

Loki rolled his eyes and yawned widely, and the conversation died for just a little while, dozing happily in each other’s arms.

“Morning, Jarvis.”

“Good morning, Mr. Laufeyson, and welcome back.” Jarvis replied, snapping into the hallway and walking beside Loki as he walked down the main hallway of the lab level. Bruce and Tony were already arguing densely about something so Loki had just pilfered some coffee and carried on. “Should I warm up your lab?”

“Yes please, turn everything on and…” Loki stopped in the doorway and stared. His lab had been rearranged and the wire table was gone. He didn’t even blink, just turned and yelled down the hallway. “TONY! What did you do to my lab? Why are you always renovating when no one is looking?”

“Because things need to be updated.” Tony replied in a peevish tone, poking his head out the door of his workspace.
“Where is my table?!” Loki wove his arms, somehow without spilling his coffee.

“Oh, right.” Tony came down the hall and slid past Loki like it was something he did to people every other day, gesturing at a silver square that was now embedded in the floor. “It’s in the floor. Six by six foot space on the floor, floor to ceiling work space, you can walk on it and through it without hurting it.”

“What.” Loki said flatly.

“You like to work with your whole body.” Tony replied, watching Jarvis power up the new frame ‘table’ and run a test sequence. “You usually stay standing anyway, but you can roll a chair onto this if you want. I thought this would give you more space to work with.”

He stared at Tony for a long moment, then looked at the demo Jarvis was running. “I’ll see how it works.”

“Well I hope you like it because I sent your old table to Reed Richards to play with.” Tony slapped his shoulder, left the room and was back in his dense conversation with Bruce before he was halfway down the hall.

“Why do I love him?” Loki lamented.

“Because he understands you, sir.” Jarvis replied without missing a beat.

“That was rhetorical.” Loki shook his head and set his coffee on the desk that now held the computer touchscreens. “Ok, bring up everything they’ve been working on…” He stepped onto the floor where his table had been and watched as the lights went down in the room, a constellation of designs popping up around him. “Oh. I might like this. Where to begin…” It was half an hour later when his brain registered something. “Jarvis, who is Reed Richards?”

“Reed Richards, also known as Mr. Fantastic.” A holoscreen popped up, displaying video. “He’s one of the Fantastic Four.”

“More superheroes?” Loki peered at the screen.

“Yes. They are also residents of New York, and Dr. Richards has been a longtime acquaintance and occasional business partner, or rival, of Mr. Stark.”

“And Tony sent him my former table… why, exactly?”
“Christmas, Mr. Laufeyson. And he knew that Dr. Richards did not have one, as Mr. Stark builds each table himself. He said superheroes are hard to shop for.”

“I suppose they would be.” Sometimes Loki felt like he finally got this world and other times he felt like he was staring at a zoo exhibit from another dimension. “Change up my playlist, would you? Faster tempo.”

“Of course sir.” Jarvis changed the music up. “He also sent a table to Mr. Bruce Wayne, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Wayne, Wayne…” Loki looked around and pointed his light pen at a piece of equipment in his lab that had WAYNE stamped on it. “That Wayne?”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, what’s his motive?”

“He wants to start working on cross-company projects, which means getting everyone on the same page equipment wise. So he’s raising everyone else up to his standards. His words, sir.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Loki snickered into his coffee mug. “This should be interesting.”

“This is Avengers Tower, Mr.Laufeyson. Very little is boring.”

“Touche.”

“So, cross-company projects?” Loki asked later. The Avengers were all in the rumpus room. Steve had made chili, so everyone had gathered there.

“Yeah.” Tony replied easily. “There’s a lot of laws against us buying each other out but I had the lawyers dig around and we can work together without pissing off the feds, so I’m putting together some business proposals.”

“To what end though? This seems rather against the point of profit and competition.”

Tony grinned at him. “A warm light for all mankind to share.” When Loki gave him a look, he waved a hand. “Alright, alright. Remember that drunken conversation about the Wardenclyffe and spaceships? Well, I want to make that a reality. Stark Industries, Wayne Enterprises, a braintrust backing it. Certainly I’m all for profit but this is SPACE. You know, final frontier? That’s not anyone’s, that’s everyone’s. I’m sure we can find a way to make money equally AND work together
AND get space travel going.” He took a few bites of chili. “NASA’s done well with what little they have but it’s time to throw our backs in it and get things really rolling. Between us three and my resources, Bruce and his resources, and Reed with whatever he’s got, we should be able to accomplish something or lay a lot of groundwork.”

Loki stared. “Goodness, you’re very serious about this.”

“I’m serious about a lot of stuff, just no one ever pays attention.”

“You haven’t seen Bruce Wayne in a few years anyway.” Pepper said. “He talked to you about the last STARK expo, I know that.”

“Yeah before everything went totally to shit, thank you Hammer.” Tony snorted. “And yeah, that’s another reason I’m doing it, I mean I want to do more with Bruce and Reed anyway, they’re great guys and great minds. I’m a fan of Reed’s.”

“So am I.” Bruce said. “I’ve been following his papers for years.”

Steve was looking back and forth between them all. “You know, I like this idea, Tony. I know what few space ships this planet has are aging.”

“The shuttle was a great idea but there are people who work in this building younger than the shuttles are.” Tony replied.

“Ships that go into space?” Thor asked, quiring an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what you’re imagining but it’s not correct. Think more Star Wars and less Pirates of the Caribbean.” Loki advised.

“Ah. Well, since we are talking about space travel.” Thor lifted his voice slightly so everyone in the room tracked onto him. “I’m returning to Asgard tomorrow.”

“Oh, well, I suppose you have been here a while, you want to do a group lunch?” Tony wanted to know.

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d all like to visit Asgard for, oh, one of your weeks?”

There was roughly ten seconds of silence, then Tony and Bruce simultaneously hit the ceiling in sheer, utter glee.
“Seriously? You’re not fucking with me, right?” Tony demanded.

“Asgard? You’re actually offering us a trip to another world and you really think we’re going to say no?” Bruce demanded at the same time. “The closest any person on this planet has gotten is our own moon and you really think we’ll say no?”

“Can I bring some stuff? Oh, nevermind, I totally am and you’re not stopping me.”

“We need to build something so we can see how fast we move when we take his way back.” Bruce said to Tony.

“Yes, we need to build a lot of things very quickly.”

“I think it’s a generous offer and I think we’re going.” Steve said, to a wave of laughter.

“Providing we can get permission from Fury.” Phil said, prompting Tony to groan loudly.

“Why do you have to be a spoilsport?” He whined. “Why do we need permission?”

“Because six… seven, my apologies, Loki… of SHIELD’s main assets are going to skip the entire planet for a week?” Phil quirs an eyebrow. “That seems like something Fury will have an opinion on.”

“If it all comes down to it, Nat and I can stay behind, sir.” Clint said.

“No, no, absolutely not, all of us.” Tony said.

“I agree, Thor extended the invitation to all of us and it would hardly be fair to leave anyone behind.” Steve said.

“Yes.” Thor said, giving Tony a narrow look. “It took a lot of discussion with my father to convince him to agree to this, Tony, and he was still strongly of the opinion that our technology is not for Midgard, and so am I.”

“Yeah, sure.” Tony feigned innocence, badly. “Pepper can come too, right?”

“Oh, no, it sounds amazing but I actually have a job, Tony.”
“So do I but Pepper this isn’t Venice for a weekend this a whole entire other planet you have to come!” Tony gesticulated wildly. “We have a board for a reason! Let them run the company and come with us!”

She rubbed her eyes. “Tony, I swear…”

“Asgard? City of Gold? Level two society or something? ANOTHER PLANET? Come on, you haven’t had a vacation in ages…”

“Tony…”

He glanced round for backup and paused, because the couch was now missing who was next to him. “Loki?”

Loki let out a breath and leaned back against the conference room door, closing himself off from the rest of the rumpus room and sliding down slowly to sit on the floor, digging out his cell phone and finding Doctor Annette in his contact list, hitting the call button and cradling the phone against his ear.

His mental health had been good, lately, but he knew this sensation, the edges coming apart and unraveling, Annette had called it triggering and he could not afford to collapse now, not anymore, he was not going to fall apart in front of everyone just because Thor had offered him a week at home. Not home, Asgard, a former home that had nearly killed him, had dropped him to darkness then to silence then to this planet. And thank everything for that last one, landing in Tony Stark’s arms and trust and love was one of the best things to ever happen to him in his life.

“Loki?”

“Doctor, I…” His voice was rattling, he realized. “Trigger. Triggered. What do I…”

“Calm down. Breathe. Where are you right now?”

“Conference room. That one we first talked in.” He forced himself to take a deep slow breath.

“Mr. Laufeyson?” Jarvis’ voice was quiet. “Mr. Stark wants to know if you’re alright.”

He almost laughed at that, hand clutching involuntarily at his phone. “Tell him I’m talking to my doctor and I’ll be out in a few minutes.” He swallowed hard. “Okay, uh. .. This hasn’t happened, in a while. I thought I was doing better. I felt like I was getting better.”
“It takes time, Loki.” Annette’s voice was calming. “And you have been doing better. You’ve been making progress and you’ve been making a clear effort to improve. Your relationship with your brother proves your progress.”

He rubs his eyes. “Yeah. I .. I won’t claim that’s been the easiest thing to accomplish but it’s getting easier. The trip I just got back from felt important.”

“It was.” Annette agreed. “You were willing to go out of your comfort zone in a lot of ways. You’ve been using your significant others as grounding. There’s nothing wrong with that, really, but being willing to be away from them and staying on your own feet during that? Important, even more so that you were with your brother during that time.” She pauses. “Now you’re back at the Tower.”

“Yes.” He leaned his head back against the door, eyes closing.

“You’re usually secure there. May I ask what happened?”

“Thor’s invited everyone back to Asgard for a visit. Whole team, including me.” He swallowed hard.

“Asgard.” She repeated back. They had spoken of Loki’s homeworld and he oscillated between wistful memory and boiling anger and everything in between.

“I don’t think I’m formally an exile, anymore.” Loki said this slowly. “But I’m uncertain. I’m not sure what my… legal status is, so to speak.”

“I’d say that’s beside the point right now wouldn’t you?” Annette replied.

That made him laugh bitterly. “I suppose that it is, yes. It’s… the idea of returning there…” He trailed out, feeling the world rattle around him again.

“You don’t have to.” She replied firmly. “You don’t have to. Remember that. If you aren’t ready then don’t go.”

“But, Tony…”

“I know how much you care about him but this isn’t about him, this is about YOU, and YOUR health.” She kept her voice firm. “YOU need to be self-aware enough to take care of yourself and be as centered as you can. You’ve been doing a lot better. Don’t hedge your mental health on someone else, no matter how much you care. You are allowed to be selfish when it comes to your own recovery.”
Loki was quiet for a moment, swallowing hard. “There is another thing about this. My children. Fenrir and Sleipnir. They are on Asgard and I only have gotten to spend a few hours with Sleipnir since this all happened. I haven’t seen Fenrir at all. They cannot come to me, doctor, and this is a chance to go to them.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I see.”

“And.. My mother. Odin and I are on… tenuous terms, I suppose. He might understand, now. Might. Though I am still upset and may be for a long time. But my mother? She’s barely seen me at all since I fell from the Rainbow Road. They thought me dead then knew me as a betrayer and now? I am just the crazy little brother.”

“You’re hardly just that, Loki.”

“I know, but.” He shrugged.

“So you have reasons to go, and reasons to stay.” She considered. “Don’t talk yourself into it if you won’t feel safe, Loki. Your people are long lived. If you need a few more months to get your feet under yourself, I am sure that your children and mother will accept that.”

“The problem is, this isn’t as easy as just … getting in a car or a plane and leaving. My ability to leave will be controlled by others. And that’s… frightening.”

“Then tell them that. Tell them you don’t want to be trapped there and that you want to be able to return here when you say so.” When Loki didn’t reply, she sighed. “This is only your choice, do you understand me? Only yours, don’t let anyone else talk you into, or out of, anything. If you want to stay on this world because you don’t feel safe going home, then that’s what you need to do. If you think you’re ready to visit home so you can see your children, then do so. It’s a big step. You’ve been taking a lot of big issues head on lately.”

“I guess I have.” He finally said. “Thank you. For talking to me, I mean, this…”

“No. I’m here to help you and I told you, you can call whenever you feel like you need to talk to me. It’s my job, and honestly you’ve been a good patient. You try. It’s more than a lot do.”

He almost smiled. “How should I put this to Thor, then?”

“IT always worries me when he does this.” Tony had pulled out of the group and had had Jarvis pop some screens up around him, hands flying rapid fire in the projections then pushing the screen over to Bruce to look at. Phil had also stepped away, to call Fury and discuss the situation.
“He’ll tell us what’s going on.” Pepper said, watching what they were doing and sipping coffee. “And better this than how he was when he first came back.”

“Don’t remind me.” Tony never wanted to see Loki like that again, the fever screaming and wound up tight enough to shatter, the howling sobs of pain.

“Pretty straightforward.” Bruce remarked.

“Trying to keep it simple, we don’t have a lot of time to build stuff here.” Tony replied. “Most of what I want to take with is built. I want to take some gear, the wire frame case and a Jarvis module especially.”

“You prepared for this.”

“I prepared for something, anyway. Contingency plans to contingency plans.”

“What is so hard to understand when I say that our technology is not for this world?” Thor wanted to know, walking over and watching Bruce pass the screen back to Tony.

“Uh, the ‘you’re keeping tech away from me’ part.” Tony peered at him. “Nope, no chance Point Break.”

“You are not a very good guest and you are not even a guest yet.”

Pepper burst into laughter.

“To be fair there’s a chance we might not understand it anyway. You guys are what, a type two society?” Bruce said.

“I must admit that grading system has never sat well with me.” Thor replied. “Jarvis explained it to me the first time you said as such.”

“It’s technology. We’ll figure it out. Or we won’t but we’ll have a great time failing at it.” Tony said. “And we’ll be on another planet either way.”

Pepper looked at Thor and nodded at Tony. “You’re going home and he’s going to Disneyland.”

“Woo Disneyland!”

Thor settled on folding his arms and just staring at Tony. Bruce nearly hurt himself laughing at
Thor’s face, which had settled nicely into Thor’s ‘what in the actual fuck, Tony?’ expression.

On the other side of the room, the conference room door opened and Loki stepped out, looking a bit raw around the edges and still holding his phone. After a moment he clasped his hands in front of his face, phone still in hand, then shoved it in his back pocket as he walked over, rubbing his eyes.

“Hey. You didn’t say you were okay.” Tony said when Loki joined them.

“I’m not, but I will be.” He replied, looking at Thor. “What is my legal status on Asgard?”

“You are asking if you are still in exile?” Thor canted his head. “No, as far as I know your official sentence has lifted. Father believes you are happier here.”

“He’s right.” Loki conceded. “Realize this, for you it’s ‘our’ home but for me it’s returning to a place that, to me, holds many scars and a lot of pain, a place repeatedly did me wrong and threw me out. I am.. at terms with a lot of it but it’s just not as simple as you think it is, for me to consider returning to Asgard.”

Thor hummed. “By the same token it is a place that should have a lot of good memories, more than the bad.”

“Yes, but it is the bad that broke my mind.” Loki said in a slightly severe tone. “A mind that, may I remind you, is still broken. Please just accept that this is hard for me.” When his brother nodded, he continued. “But, my children are there. I want to see my children. I want to assure mother, in person, that I am alright. The trouble is, I have no control over transport. No ability to leave if I become overwhelmed. What I need from you, Thor, is a promise that if I get in a bad spot you’ll get me off Asgard. You’ll bring me back here.”

“I am not going to claim I understand.” Thor said after a moment. “It would be rude, I think, to claim to understand what you are going through when I never have. That said, I can more than do what you ask of me, Loki.”

“Thank you.” He inclined his head slightly.

“Look, man, if you aren’t comfortable…” Tony started.

“Oh, do not even pretend that you wouldn’t pout for months if you didn’t get to visit an alien world and play with all our toys.” Loki smirked, then grinned when the other man pouted. “But, the sentiment is appreciated, Tony. That said, you and Pepper have been very important in helping me feel… grounded. Safe and secure,” He looked at Pepper, clasping his hands and drawing his brows together. “Come with us? Please?”
She stared at him a moment. “Are you trying to emotionally blackmail me into taking a vacation?”

“Is it working?” He replied, keeping the pleading expression.

“See, this is why I’m not the pants in this family, because if he broke that out on me, I’d be done. He’d have half my stocks and the entirety of Hawaii before I came to my senses.” Tony said to Bruce. Bruce snorted.

“And what, exactly, will I tell the board?” Pepper finally said.

“Tell them they’d do the exact same thing if they had a chance to visit Asgard. Short notice or not.”

She sighed. “Fine. Just… FINE.” She broke to a smile though when Loki threw his arms around her happily.

“Thank you Pepper. It means a lot to me.”

“Everything is well I take it?” Phil said, entering the room again.

“What did the boss have to say?” Clint asked, sitting on the back of the couch with Natasha. They were both unashamedly watching the drama happening around the screens. Steve had sat with them but was sketching, putting details on a drawing of Tony and Bruce with the floating projected screens. Steve’s online gallery got a lot of hits these days.

“He agreed.” Phil shrugged.

“Really?” Natasha canted her head slightly.

“I’m just as surprised as you are, but he said he’d make some phone calls because, and I do quote, ‘you all aren’t the only fuckin’ superheroes this planet has.’” He half smiled. “But, he said if you go, I have to go with. Apparently I’m to start some actual formal talks with Odin, and attempt to set up better communication. Assuming I am welcome on this trip, Thor?”

“Of course you are, Son of Coul! I have told many stories of your valor to my friends, it will be an honor to have you as a guest in the house of Odin.” Thor looked absolutely thrilled with the idea.

“So, when are we all leaving then?” Steve said. “And what should we pack, just clothes for a week I assume.”

“Actually, since the Man of Iron has been so good in keeping us in clothing here, I think I’d like to return the favor and get everyone fitted by the royal tailor.” Thor said. “By all means, bring some
clothing, but it is something to think about.”

“I’m not sure how to feel about that.” Tony said after a moment.

“We’re going LARPing.” Phil replied without missing a beat, smiling when Tony about choked on his own spit then burst into laughter.

“Right, so would I be a warrior or caster then?”

That made Phil pause. “Red Mage, or a warrior with a specialty class multiclassed in.”

“Oh, so now we know what you’re doing in your office, you’re playing Final Fantasy where no one can see you.”

“What are they talking about?” Steve asked Clint, not even looking up from his sketchbook, having flipped pages.

Clint and Natasha both laughed.

“There is no way you’re getting this past my father.” Loki decided, looking at the gear cases Tony had. “He will have this all destroyed, Stark.”

“Well, then he’ll owe me about half a million bucks.” Tony replied. “What’s the exchange rate between the American dollar and Asgardian currency? What DO you guys call your money?”

He put his head in his hands. “Stark. I swear.”

“I do not remember this half a million being on expense sheets.” Pepper said, looking at the small rolling suitcase and hardshell backpack sitting on the floor of the apartment.

“That’s because I paid for it with my personal stock profit not my company account.” Tony said. “The suitcase is a mobile workstation, it unfolds into something a lot like the wireframe set up Loki has now. The backpack is a mobile splinter of Jarvis. If I’m going off world so is he. Look, I’m not taking a suit and that feels weird enough as it is. I just want to be able to take in everything and model things.”

“This is a vacation.” Pepper said peevishly. “You accuse me of never taking one, well, you never do either.”
“Oh this is totally a vacation. This is going to be fun.”

Loki meanwhile was investigating the ‘suitcase’ and had found that the keypad, punching in the same code Tony used for his garage workshop and sitting back on his heels with the suitcase neatly unfolded in four directions, then again to make a roughly four by four platform with a raised box in the center, a wire frame startup hovering in midair. Realizing it was distorting, he shifted and looked at it then used a foot to push it up against a wall, whereupon it neatly became clear, using the wall as a projection surface.

“Yeah, I won’t have the ceiling setup right where this is going but I wanted something less restrictive than the roll out mats.” Tony said. “So I had to make some concessions.”

“What’s it running on?”

“One of my old palladium arc reactors. So’s the backpack.”

“This is why the NRC loves to hate you.” Pepper said.

“Well I love to hate them right back.”

Loki snorted and shut the workspace down, folding it back into a suitcase then standing. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“It scared me a bit when you disappeared into the conference room.” Tony looked at him.

He blew out a sigh. “Yes. It scared me, too.”

“So, I just realized something.”

Clint looked up from his coffee, giving Tony a foggy look. “What?”

“We’re going to be the shortest people on Asgard.”

He paused. “Well if Thor and Loki are standard issue…”

“You see my point.” Tony snickered.

“Oh, this will be fun to watch.” Clint snickered. “Because I don’t care too much, but you? Oh boy.”
“I admit I do find many of the people of this world rather short of stature.” Thor said, helping himself to the coffee.

“My mouth makes up for my lack of height.” Tony snorted.

“Your mouth makes up for all sorts of things.” Loki said, arriving and putting the espresso press to work.

“I didn’t need to know that.” Clint rubbed his eyes.

“Oh please like everyone doesn’t have theories.” Tony made a face.

“No, no, I have enough excitement in my life without wondering about yours.”

“Yes, what IS it with you Phil and Natasha exactly?”

“Could we just shorten that to ‘what IS Phil’?” Loki said over the espresso press.

“Someone who can sneak up on you all at will.” Phil said, leaning on the counter.

“FUCK!” Loki was promptly on the other side of the room, glaring when Clint started laughing. “I have politely asked you not to do that, Mr. Couslon.”

“Yes, I will change how I walk, and next, stop breathing.” Phil gave him a look.

“We could put a bell collar on him.” Tony suggested, then went still at the look both Clint and Phil gave him. “Or not?”

“So when are we actually leaving?” Pepper asked, stepping over. Everyone’s relatively minor luggage had gathered in the rumpus room. At this point she suspected she could have bunk beds put in the rumpus room and it’d turn into an eternal sleep over. Did anyone actually live in their apartments?

“I was thinking just before lunch?” Thor said, considering schedules in his head. “Given how the time difference seems to be working out, that will put us just before dinner on Asgard.”

“They do know I’m coming along, yes?” Loki said. “I would hate to be put back into chains the minute I step off the Rainbow Road.”
“We’re still using the side paths.” Thor replied. “The Bifrost is under repair, but it’ll take some time.”

“So we’re taking the country roads instead of the highway?” Phil said.

“Something like that.” Loki agreed, eyebrow up. “You said I was no longer officially in exile but you do understand my concern I hope.”

“Of course. You’re a free man, Loki, but I imagine there will be a lot of staring.” Thor paused and lifted an eyebrow up in return when Loki took this as a cue to swap skin. “Especially if you do that.”

“Can I just admit that I never get used to that?” Clint said after a moment.

“Hey, I had to, but once I figured out I can draw on him I adapted pretty fast.” Tony kept a straight face.

Loki tossed his hair back and swapped his skin again.

“Fuckin’ diva.” Clint muttered into his coffee.

Loki slugged his shoulder and sorted. “This from a man who struts and wears purple.”

“I do not strut!”

“So, Phil, you regretting moving in yet?” Steve asked, physically moving Loki aside and starting another pot of coffee.

Phil laughed.
Chapter 3

“So how does this work?”

They’re still in the rumpus room, their respective luggage at hand, because they’re apparently leaving from the balcony and it’s brutally cold and windy outside.

“I call for Heimdall, and we go.” Thor replied, idly spinning Mjolnir in his hand in a lazy circle.

“I’m guessing he doesn’t have a cell phone, and I’m not paying for the long distance on that call.” Tony replied.

He half laughed. “No need for that, Heimdall sees and hears all. He likely already knows. I will simply call out to him and we will go.”

“Wait, screaming at the sky can actually make gods respond?”

Loki, meanwhile, was looking out the tall windows at the sky. “Yes, he’s watching, I can feel his gaze.”

“Well I feel paranoid now.” Clint said, also looking outside.

“Okay, wait, I’ve caught some of how this works.” Tony said. “Heimdall is somehow in control of how you guys move, and you guys have power. So you saying his name like, uh… a sonar ping. You’re getting his attention and letting him know to beam you up or whatever. It leaves that Celtic knot where it’s been used.” One of which was now etched into the deck of the Helicarrier, apparently permanently or until the entire deck was redone.

“His name is an invocation, really.” Loki said. “He’s… Oh, it’s hard to explain, but yes, you are right, he can… open the doors.”

“I’m not sure if I’m curious or terrified.” Bruce said calmly. He was wearing the Jarvis backpack.

“Dr. Banner, if…” Phil started.

“No, the Other Guy’s mostly excited, this is me, as a scientist, speaking.”

“I think it’s safe to say that we don’t actually understand.” Steve said, looking at Thor. “Easier to show us, perhaps. Are we all ready to go?” When everyone nodded, he tipped a hand to Thor. “Your show.”
“Then we shall, as you say, get this show on the road!”

The balcony was snow free, but only because the wind tended to scour it off and coat everything with a sheen of ice. Tony had robots specifically tasked with making it safe to traverse, after he’d skidded and wiped out into the glass trying to gear down. Hilarious after, not so hilarious during. Sand and salt crunched under their feet, about half the group swearing from the cold because the wind chill was well into the negatives. Loki moved to act as a windblock, holding his coat half open trying to shield Tony and Pepper as his skin went blue on instinct, then Thor was shouting.

There was the strange sensation of being picked up, all at once, yanked toward something, a split second shock of breathlessness and bone deep chill, then it was like falling through a doorway and they were skidding on their feet on a walkway that almost seemed made of discolored glass, Thor landing lightly on his toes because he was long used to it.

“What. What the shit.” Tony wanted to know, arm over his reactor on sheer baffled reflex.

“Don’t ask me how fast we went, because we are off the chart high.” Bruce replied, having taken the device they made out of his coat pocket.

“Oh shit son we are into theoretical physics then, light speed travel.” Tony realized he was sitting down and let Loki heft him to his feet, then they both picked up Pepper.

“That was a fun trip.” Phil was brushing himself off and stepping over to a softly laughing man in golden armor. “You must be Heimdall?”

“I am, yes. Welcome back, Prince Thor… Prince Loki.” Heimdall’s eyes flicked over them both before focusing back down at Phil.

“I’m Agent Phil Coulson, of SHIELD, an organization of Midgard. I was asked to accompany them. Thank you for transporting us.”

“It is nothing, no thanks are necessary.”

“Is that a castle?” Clint wanted to know, staring into the distance.

“Well, it’s a bit more Wizard of Oz than Star Trek but it’ll do.” Tony clapped his hands together. “Are we walking?”

Asgard had apparently known that their Prince was returning because there was a decent turn out. Tony judged that it wasn’t a full out party but they seemed glad to see Thor back. They seemed a bit
more uneasy about Loki, he was getting a lot of odd looks that seemed to say “Shouldn’t you be in chains?” Tony stayed close to him, bracketed him in between he and Pepper, who seemed to understand without words what they were doing. Loki just smiled grimly and walked with them, eyes sweeping over once familiar halls.

“Hey, it’s the Riders of Rohan.” Bruce said when Thor’s friends appeared, and he strode to meet them. Thor had been back in armor when they left, and he instantly fit in with the others, leaving the group of Midgardians to stare around at the hall, baffled.

“They don’t do anything small here.” Pepper half smiled.

“I’m going to have a complex by the time we leave.” Tony dropped his duffel bag on top of his rolling case and set his hands on his hips, staring around.

“You say that as if you don’t already have one.” Loki smirked, then said in total sync with Tony, “Fuck you, Loki,” before smirking down at him again.

Tony stared at him. “Am I that predictable?” Clint was hurting himself trying to muffle laughter, and Steve was hiding his grin behind his hand.

“In some aspects, yes, and in all other aspects you’re a loose cannon.” Phil said peacefully.

“Do you ever get excited? About anything?”

“This is a vacation for you, Mr. Stark. For me, it’s work.”

Thor was suddenly back, grinning wide and relaxed. “It is perfectly fine to leave your things here, for now. I have friends and family to introduce you and sights to show you. Welcome to Asgard, friends. They have already heard much about you.”

For Loki, the day passed like an out of body experience.

He wasn’t triggering, thankfully, but he’d never felt simultaneously so home, and so far away from home. He’d lived here nearly all of his life and the halls and corridors and sweeping rooms were familiar, well-trodden, memories rooted into every place. Here there had been laughter and childhood games, and stern lectures, and life. Here had been betrayal, and pain, and the agony of being different even before he’d entirely known why or how. Here he had learned to tell truth slant, to weave webs and play games around his brother and his friends because he never ceased to be the extra player in their games, though Thor never said that no, Thor always tossed arms around him and asked for him to come when he tried to sidle away.
Belonging and separate, here and gone, the stolen hidden frozen relic among the rays of bright sun and electrical sparks.

He was a free man, but his acts were clearly not forgotten, not in the way the citizens and castle staff watched him with strange suspicious gazes, or the guards pulled up straighter and watched him with narrowed eyes. At one point while passing through a doorway with the others he’d snapped at them “I am unarmed and in Midgardian clothing you armored gits, I would thank you not to treat me with hostility for visiting family” and they’d looked away.

“What in the actual fuck?” Tony had asked as they stepped down the hall.

Loki brushed it off, then they were walking the steps of the throne room, and Tony had joined Loki in his unease. Odin’s greeting was warm though, to both Thor and Loki, then Frigga had been there.

“My sons!”

“Mother…”

And now, here he was, sprawled out on a bench like a child still, head on one of her legs and eyes closed, and finally home slammed into his chest, safe for just a few seconds, for a breath, enough to let words so hard to say slip out. “I am so, so sorry.”

“I didn’t approve of any of it.” Frigga replied. She felt no guilt in spiriting Loki away from the others. Odin had returned from Midgard, not long ago, and spoke of a battle well fought. Not only well fought, but he’d fought it alongside both of their sons, and his words of Loki were… hesitant. That Loki had fought well, sacrificed much, that he seemed comfortable on Midgard and that he was, apparently, quite ill in the mind. Frigga had known that for years, though. “I didn’t approve of what he did to Thor. Of what he almost did to you. Had he not listened to Thor, the halls would have shook with my anger, know that.”

“Nets of my own making, mother. They catch me sometimes. I might have directed Thor’s anger. I might have taken advantage of a situation. I might have… allowed enemy far too close for comfort, to try to prove myself.” He stayed where he was, dreading her anger at his admittance. Blow for blow, no one could match he and Thor’s mother when she was angry. Even Odin ran and waited for it to pass.

“We know.” Her voice stayed gentle. “That isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about. I do not need to know of my son then, I need to know of my son now, and his life, and his friends. If you would tell me, I would hear it from you. Your father thinks you happy, on Midgard. Thor does too.”

“I am.” He admitted, opening his eyes. “I have definition to my life. Purpose. People who care about me. I’m not just… the lesser son.”
“You were never the lesser son.”

He hissed softly and sat up, looking at her and dropping the glamour, eyes flashing to red and skin flushing to blue. “Yes, mother, because a frost giant could have held the throne of Asgard.” He said this quietly. “Please do not lie to me.”

Frigga sighed before just looking at him, calm. “You are my son. Perhaps not by birth but when Odin stepped back into the halls, bloodied and wounded, he shrugged off the doctors and everything else until you were in my arms. You are family and were just as worthy a successor, and in the short time you held the throne, you held it with dignity.”

“Yes. While betraying it.” He looked away, hands on the bench on either side of him, then sighed. “I am … not right, mother. I am sorry.”

“I know. I have for a long time. But you are better, now.”

“I take medicine that calms the temperamental tides of my mind.” He blew out a sigh. “I know enough of myself to know when it is pulling me down.”

There was a long silence, punctuated by a guard passing by and jumping at Loki’s appearance. Loki offered the guard a single digit salute while his skin and eyes returned to the “normal” colors, and the guard stood down and backed out of the room silently.

“You want to know of my friends.” He looked back to Frigga, quirking an eyebrow.

“I want to know of your new family.” She returned, smiling just a bit. “I want to know who has you smiling so, when you think no one is looking at you.”

Loki cleared his throat and looked away and tried not to blush like a child. “Ah. Yes.”

Frigga laughed, loud and delighted. “I have not seen you taken by anyone in a long time.”

“They understand me. They took me in and were willing to fight their own to keep me safe.”

“They.”

He snickered, shaking his head and giving up on hiding the blush, and letting himself talk.

“It’s not like I’m being rude to the guy I just don’t want to sit next to him at the dinner table. That’s not much to ask.”
I doubt that'll be an issue.”

“...We’re screwing his kid, you never know.”

Clint and Natasha were sitting on the same balcony railing, side by side, in identical poses with mutually amused expressions. Phil was leaning next to them. He’d already taken his turn with the tailor and somehow managed to look perfectly at ease in local fashion. So now he had joined his agents and was enjoying the eternal Tony Stark show, yet another Tony versus Pepper edition, while the Asgardian tailor took Pepper’s measurements. Another tailor was trying to figure out what to do about Tony, who apparently just didn’t fit into the “adult” section of Asgardian wardrobe.

“I don’t get the issue.” Steve finally said, looking back and forth between them. “I know that meeting your significant other’s parents should bring on some tension but you always act like you’re about to hide under the nearest piece of furniture Tony.”

“Yeah, Tony and fathers, just…” Pepper made a waving motion at throat level.

“Yes, yes, let’s just hang up a big neon sign that says ‘Tony Stark has daddy issues’, let’s just do that shall we?” Tony replied in a snide tone, hands on his hips.

The tailors looked at each other, baffled.

“Ignore him, that’s what we do.” Steve advised.

“Fuck you too, Rogers.” Tony snorted.

“My bed’s not that big.” Loki said, arriving in the room. He’d spent probably half an hour staring at his old wardrobe before he was willing to touch his old clothing. His room was clean but untouched, the same marked book on the dresser waiting for him to resume reading it, the same spells drawn on paper on his work desk. Like a pause button had been hit on his quarters, the entire family refusing to think he was gone. Eventually he’d changed, settling back into heavy cloth and leather, the comfort of the high collared jacket surprising. He’d left off the golden armor and the cape, but the change in wardrobe had gotten him a bit more respect from the guards.

Tony blinked a few times, then made an explosion hand gesture next to his head with accompanying sound effects.

Pepper pointed at him. “What he said.”

Loki cackled because changing clothes had just become worth it. “Sorry for being away from everyone.”
“How’s your mom?” Clint asked.

“Happy to see me apparently.” He moved and hopped up to sit on the railing on the other side of Phil. “Dinner’s when we get everyone in wardrobe. A bit late for the house, but, guests do shake everything up.”

“Fine I get it, you’re going to have issues with me because of my height, fit Steve already.” Tony tagged Steve into dealing with the tailor, stepping away and joining the group on the balcony. Bruce reappeared from a changing room, dressed and amused, claiming a chair in the room itself.

“So, did I miss anything?” Loki asked, looking at Tony then at Phil.

“Very little.” Phil replied. “Just introductions and some small talk, really. Your father is humoring me. Nothing will be done in regards to our requests.”

“It is only our first day here you know.” Natasha looked at him.

“Yes. But let’s just say I will be entirely surprised if anything comes of it.”

Loki half smiled. “You scare me, but I do like you, Son of Coul.”

“That’s basically the sentiment I had the first two years working for him.” Clint snickered.

“So, first impressions of Asgard?”

“Haven’t seen a whole lot of it yet.” Tony hopped up and sat next to Loki. “Honestly? For being a type two society, I haven’t seen a lot of it yet. I know the tech’s there but this whole place is … rustic? I don’t know.”

“Medieval, by our standards.” Phil said. “This whole place is like a trip into a fantasy novel, not a science fiction novel. I think it’s mostly an issue of… expectations.”

“We expected Star Trek, we got Lord of the Rings.” Bruce said.

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. “Though I have to say a pretty effective way of keeping the technology from Bruce and I is making it so it’s impossible for us to find. Though I have been trying to figure out how your electricity works, I keep seeing things obviously running but no plugs or cables. It’s little but it’s annoying the fuck out of me.”

“If I figure it out I’ll let you know.”
“Agreed, Big Science.”

“You know, since you’re so obviously looking for something to tear into…” Loki was thoughtful, looking over his shoulder out at the horizon, then patting Tony’s shoulder and pointing. “See the blur of light moving away from the city?”

“Yeah, that’s another one of those walkways right? Like the one we came in on?”

“Yes, but that’s the broken Bifrost. It’s still in repair, about half through from what I’ve gathered.” Loki smirked because Tony’s eyes had lit up like beacons at this information. “I could be convinced to take you and Bruce out. Not the idea of a holiday to most, looking in on a construction site, but…”

“Can I see blueprints? Design documentation?” Tony wanted to know. “You know they want to keep that tech away from us.”

“Yes, but where would I be here if I wasn’t meddling in something. Besides, I am honestly curious of what you’ll make of it.”

“I sense a challenge.” Bruce said.

“It would be rude of us to turn it down.” Tony agreed. “Challenge accepted, Loki. Just tell us when.”

“I’m amused that you treat it like you have to meddle in something.” Natasha quirked an eyebrow.

“Standard operating procedures, my dear.” Loki quirked one back.

“You know, I could get used to this.” Pepper said thoughtfully, stepping out of a dressing room.

“So could the rest of us.” Tony replied, without missing a beat.

“And badass boots instead of heels.” She walked over grinning and tagged Natasha in for fitting. “So, who wants to take a bet with me about how long it’ll be before Frigga starts in on guilt about grand children?”

Phil guffawed. “I’ll take that bet. Three days.”

“You figure it’ll be that long?”

Loki was horrified. “I already have two children, thank you.”
“I think she means ones that can wear crowns, no offence man.” Clint said.

“Yes, yes, my children were born of strange circumstance, but they’re still my children and therefore grandchildren, it’s Thor’s turn now dammit.”

“Um, not to point out the obvious but you’re currently a guy.” Tony blinked. “Would she be expecting you father or mother a child?”

“Well so far I have one of each, and it’s still Thor’s turn!”

“First we break the laws of physics and then we break some laws of biology. Shall we shoot for math next?” Bruce observed.

“Okay, fill me in, what’s wrong with wanting grandkids?” Steve joined them on the balcony.

Everyone else stared at him.

“Okay, I think you win for passing for local.” Tony didn’t even bother hiding the stare. “Did they even have to alter that at all?”

“I’m not the topic of conversation.” Steve was peevish.

“You are now.” Phil smiled brightly.

“Dammit, guys.”

Dinner with the Aesir was not exactly what any of the visiting parties expected. They ended up in a large dining hall, tables set up in a half circle, and it became clear this wasn’t just family, this was family and friends. It was borderline chaos, a din, loud boisterous voices and kids and a few dogs trotting around hoping for table scraps. It was increasingly clear just why Thor had issues with volume control.

“This is bedlam.” Tony observed. He’d already ate more than his fill and was just leaning his elbows on the table and taking it all in as best he could. “Is it like this every night?”

“Usually. It’s a bit … more today since we have new guests.” Loki said, sitting next to him and looking like he dearly wanted to fall back off the planet. He’d nearly forgotten about this somehow and being back almost in the center of it as numbing and overwhelming at the same time. He wasn’t alone, though, Bruce seemed similarly cowed a few seats down and across, looking around with wide eyes. “Bruce. Are you alright?”
“Yeah, just. Wow. I thought it was loud when all of us got together.”

They were still sat loosely in a group. Tony had sat himself between Pepper and Loki, Clint Natasha and Phil were all sitting together (Tony was having theories that it’d be easier to break most molecular bonds than separate the errant trio). Steve had migrated at some point and had had become the center of attention in a gesture filled conversation between himself, Thor, and the Riders of Rohan. Natasha and Clint were also a bit wide eyed.

“You know, it’s impressive, this is more out of control than the circus.” Clint said.

“Have either of you tried this yet?” Phil wanted to know, coming back toting a trio of mugs. There were casks along the wall of various labels, Phil had been working his way down the line trying each.

“No, not yet…” Natasha took one of the mugs and sipped then, then stared at it.

“I am going to be wasted after one of these.” Clint decided, then looked at Phil and lifted an eyebrow. “How many of these have you had?”

Phil held up the mug. “This is my third.”

“So, were you born with two livers or what?” Tony said, watching this.

He shrugged, lips quirking. “It is not my fault that you’re all lightweights.”

“I think he needs to challenge Volstagg to a drinking game.” Loki smirked.

“That is a terrible idea.” Tony said. “Let’s do it.”

“Do I get a say in this?” Phil wanted to know.

Tony was already standing and pushing away from the table. “Nope. Come on.” He almost scuffed Phil to drag him along and thought better of it, waiting for him to get up instead then walking over. “Hey. Volstagg.”

“Yes, Man of Iron?” Volstagg lifted an eyebrow. The others fell quiet, curious.

“We think you and Phil need to have a drinking game.”
Volstagg burst into laughter, sizing up Phil. “Me, have a drinking game with a Midgardian? Surely you jest, why just one of our drinks would surely…”

He stopped because Phil cheerfully upended his current mug and slammed it, empty, on the table. “That’s number four.” Phil did one of his strange smiles. “You might have some catching up to do.”

And just that quickly everyone else was on board with this idea, a table produced and carried over and two chairs, and two remarkably small glasses (by Aesir standards) and a single bottle of liquor. Phil and Volstagg sat across from each other, Volstagg looking curious and Phil with his mildly amused smile. Volstagg had already thrown back another mug to catch up to where Phil was at.

“Thor has talked of you much, Son of Coul.” He said.

“Thor flatters, and you can call me Phil.” Phil picked up his glass and looked at it, then rather incredulously at the bottle. “A single bottle instead of one of those kegs, hm?”

“Well, this is a drinking game, let us do this right.”

“Simple rules, yes?” Hogun said, picking up the bottle and opening it. The smell was powerful enough that Tony actually took a step back from it, uncertain if he wanted to flee screaming (because it smelled like the contents of about five of his binges boiled down to booze candy) or lunge and upend it for the same reasons. “Drink for drink until one of you concedes or falls out of your chair.”

“Goodness. What is that?” Phil said, looking at the bottle again.

“To draw comparisons, what’s in the casks is our beer.” Thor said, having pulled up a chair to spectate. “That is our liquor.”

“This should prove interesting.” Phil set his glass down and laced his hands together. “So, who’s pouring?”

The contest eventually drew most of the attention of the dinner hall, a crowd gathering to watch this exchange of booze consumption. Money started exchanging hands, the odds ramping up as the bottle slowly emptied. Volstagg and Phil were both incredibly relaxed about it, exchanging stories as the drinks continued. Phil’s words were carefully guarded, even as his tongue loosened and his smile got easy and dazed. Natasha and Clint and brought chairs over to sit near him, Natasha sitting on her chair backwards and Clint sitting so he perched on the back of the chair with his feet on the seat of it.

Eventually the bottle emptied, Hogun holding it upside down incredulously and looking between Volstagg and Phil, neither of which had conceded or fallen out of their chairs. “Shall I fetch a second bottle?”

“Mm. No. I could drink more, but honestly, I’m tired.” Phil scratched at the stubble of a beard, he hadn’t bothered shaving since they’d arrived on Asgard. “Stalemate?”

Volstagg laughed out loud and held out a hand. “You, Son of Coul, astound me. Stalemate.”

Phil laughed and shook his hand, then put both hands on the table and pushed himself to his feet, staggering then laughing again as both Clint and Natasha caught him, standing on either side of him and lacing their arms behind his back. “I think I’m drunk.”

“I know you’re drunk. I asked for one glass of that and I’m pretty sure I’m drunk.” Tony said. He hadn’t drank yet with dinner and decided his one glass might as well count. It had burned like sweet lava on the way down. “What the fuck, Phil.”

“What are the sleeping arrangements because I need to lay down before I fall down.” Phil managed to pick Thor out of the crowd.

Thor burst into laughter. “Of course. Servants have already seen to your things, I suppose it’s been a long day. Come along everyone.”
“Bullshit your bed isn’t big enough, we could have a party in here!”

Loki laughed, leaning on the doorway that led to his private bath and watching Tony sprawl out on his bed and try to reach either edge. “Do remember that I am a prince. I know that’s hard to believe most days. Hell, I barely remember it most days.”

“Yeah, no, you’re royalty down to your core.” Tony sat up and looked at him. The tailors had eventually found clothing before they’d gone to eat, and had just kept it simple for now, though Loki had no doubt they were working on more complicated clothing for the rest of the week. Leather pants, a cloth long sleeved shirt with a deep lace-up v-neck (Tony had called it a Poet’s shirt) and a leather vest. The reactor was framed in by the v-neck and crossed over loosely by the laces.

“Am I, now.” Loki quirked an eyebrow.

“You know it, buster.” Pepper stepped in behind Loki from the bath and bit one of his ears, smirking at the noise Loki made in response. “So, will we be putting this rather large bed to use?”

“I support this thought.” Tony grinned.

“So do I. It hasn’t gotten any use at all for some time.” Loki stepped out of Pepper’s way, watching her walk by. She quirked a smile out of them, undoing a clasp on one shoulder of the dress and letting it fall, leaving her utterly bare besides a thong and the boots.

“Damn, woman, trying to kill me.” Tony murmured in appreciation, making a strangled noise when she smirked and turned on heel, helping Loki out of his clothing in absolutely no rush whatsoever. The multiple layers Loki wore played to this nicely, leather and soft cloth being removed and set aside. When he was finally shirtless Loki sighed and dropped the glamour, blue passing over his skin in a rush, rolling his shoulders. Tony was perched on the edge of the bed, utterly captivated by the slow reveal. “I have to admit, I’m surprised to see you wearing that face here.”

Loki shrugged, unlacing his pants and stepping out of his boots. “This skin, and my Asgardian skin, are equally a part of me. My … adoptive parents seem to have accepted it, and you two don’t mind it.”
“Don’t mind it?” Pepper just barely lifted an eyebrow. “We like it.” Then she was kneeling, getting Loki’s pants opening and hooking her hands into the waistband, yanking them down to peel the leather off of him, her pale skin and red hair a shock against his dusky skin as she licked him and he purred in approval.

“Hey, now…!” Tony protested, unbuckling the boots he was wearing with minor difficulty because he wasn’t watching what he was doing, eyes glued on the spectacle in front of him. “Do I get to participate? Feeling kind of left out over here.” The boots finally came off, and he shrugged out of the vest and dropped that on the floor as well, sliding off the bed to land on the floor and pulling the shirt off over his head.

Pepper and Loki shared a smirk then pointed at him at the same time. “Sit and stay. We’ll get to you in a moment, Stark.” One of his hands was carding through Pepper’s hair, her warm hair leaving lacy white patterns on his fingers that started fading immediately.

Tony swallowed hard and backed up a step, scrambling back and sitting on the bed, fingers digging into the blanket. “Not fair.” He mumbled this under his breath, not that he could tear his eyes away if he wanted to, Loki’s softening expression and sharpening exhalations, Pepper’s tongue and mouth working him, swallowing him nearly all the way down (which Tony knew was not a minor feat). “Guys. Left out. Dying over here. Come on.”

Loki laughed out loud and caught one of Pepper’s hands, pulling her to her feet and kissing her tenderly before picking her up, supporting her rear on one arm and taking her boots off with the other as he stepped over. “Oh, please, we know you like watching us.”


Tony babbled. Loki had stepped over to stand in front of him, and Pepper leaned and pushed Tony back. He took the hint and shoved back to make room, and she cheerfully crawled out of Loki’s grip onto the bed, pouncing on Tony and pushing him to lie down. “So, uh. I noticed no one here asked about us being in your room.”

“Prince.” Loki replied, sliding his hands under Pepper’s thong and hooking it with his thumbs, stroking down her legs and taking it with, pulling it off slowly as she got Tony’s pants undone. “And I was a somewhat adventurous teenager. This likely seems rather domestic to the staff.”

Pepper and Tony offered no reply, too busy getting Tony’s pants off, then Tony had collapsed back on the bed, hands going into her hair and the little urgent sounds starting up in his chest. Loki stroked a hand along Pepper’s back appreciatively, other hand sliding up the insides of her thighs to cup over her with a palm. Pepper moaned and pushed back into the attention, so he shifted and leaned on the edge of the bed, adding his tongue to the equation. He’d had more than enough time to learn the hidden tricks of her body, pleased when her sobs of pleasure broke to a keen of his name, legs quivering.

Tony had since gently stopped her and moved to kiss her instead, holding her and watching with an appreciative smile as she trembled through some aftershocks, twitching sporadically. “Fucking silver tongued devil.” He snickered.
“I never hear you complaining.” Loki crawled on the bed and kissed him, smiling when Tony chased Pepper’s taste in his mouth for several moments. “You in the middle, Tony.” Pepper caught on and was already moving, shifting to the center of the bed and pulling Tony over her.

They’d been together before Loki had crashed into their lives, and it came out in easygoing affection and long-practiced motions between them, Tony sprawling on top of her and kissing her happily. Her legs coiled around him, but one of Loki’s hands on the small of his back bade Tony stay still, then the little noises he was making started falling all over each other, back bowing and shoulders rounding slightly, begging with his body as he broke the kiss to pant against her neck as Loki’s cool oil-covered fingers eased him open.

“Okay, ah, ready, seriously, come on…” Tony didn’t even care he was begging anymore. These two he could beg without shame. It never worked but sometimes it seemed like they enjoyed sticking him in the middle just to draw him wire tight and keep him there.

“What’s your rush?” Loki made it three fingers and smiled at the noise that action got.

“If you don’t let him fuck me I’m going to kill you.” Pepper said conversationally.

“That’s a pretty good reason to rush.” Tony said, glaring over his shoulder and not surprised to see Loki too busy laughing to immediately do anything to either of them. “Fuck you too princess.”

“Oh, not this time I’m afraid.” Loki used his hands to push instead of holding him back and Pepper didn’t even need her hands, just arched her body against him and moaned loud and indulgent when Tony sank into her, his soft noises of pleasure becoming incoherent when Loki used his hip roll back to shove inside him.

Tony’s eyes rolled back for a moment, letting them decide on a rhythm and only far too willing to move with it, lost between two of his favorite feelings in the world. Tony Stark, admitted hedonist, proud slut. Yeah he loved hot women and hot men but even better when he could surround himself with them. Already pushing into being a functional alcoholic, his twenty-first birthday had been heralded with an orgy at a BDSM club instead of just copious amounts of booze. Good times. Then shit had started happening and people had started really mattering, and what was most important now is that the two people with him right this moment cared for him.

And by ‘cared for him’ he meant ‘might ax murder anyone who looked at him wrong’. The best kind of caring, really.

Then any amount of introspection (which he wasn’t very good at in the first place) was nicely stomped out by the feeling of Loki stroking over just the right place inside him, making his vision spark at the edges, and he stopped letting them run the show and tried to take it over instead. Pepper nearly shrieked her appreciation when he started thrusting harder, arching his hips to move against Loki right and pleasing her more in the process by how her fingernails were scratching at his shoulder blades and the back of his neck. Tony surged into the kiss, used it to muffle his sounds then
there was no helping it when Loki leaned and braced his arms on the headboard over them both, shifting to dig his bare toes in. The next heavy full-weight thrust nearly made Tony’s bones go liquid, eyes rolling back again and giving back up on having control.

Moving like that, it was never going to last long and Tony came with a helpless groan of their names when he felt Pepper tense up and quiver around him. Loki took that moment to bite hard into the top edge of one of his shoulders, and Pepper tipped over the edge listening to his outcry of sweet pain. Loki just shuddered and went limp, tilting his head back and exhaling a stream of cold fog as he rode his own orgasm out.

“I like this bed.” Pepper said fuzzily after several moments.

“We can’t take it with us.” Tony had faceplanted next to her head, voice muffled by the blanket (no, it was in fact a fur, not a furry blanket, he was now realizing).

“Then let’s have one made.”

“Ho boy. Custom furniture.” He snickered, groaning when Loki backed off and rolled off of him. “Ow. We have once again confirmed that you cannotfuck me through a bed.”

“It’s not for lack of trying.” Loki stretched out next to them, looping an arm around them and sighing. “So. I’m going to go see Fenrir tomorrow. Do you two want to come with?”

“Of course we do.” Tony grunted and rolled, then there was the usual wiggling to adjust, them ending up under the fur with Pepper snuggled in the middle for now. “Stepkids. Kind of important.”

“I still need to meet Sleipnir too.” Pepper’s voice was sleepy.

“Of course.” He was quiet for a moment, face tucked against her hair, arm around them both. Tony’s arm entwined with his. “Your ongoing acceptance of my children does sometimes amaze me.”

“We love you and you love them. It’s quite simple, really.” Tony smiled, and the room fell silent, Loki muttering something that made the lights go down. Tony almost started demanding how it worked, but was too warm and comfortable to really get a tiff going. He filed it for the morning, and slept.

It was mid-morning, and Steve had found himself in an outdoor sparring arena with Thor, the Warriors Three, and Sif. Sparring with Thor had become something of a normal thing for Steve, mostly because they didn’t have to hold back with each other. Hold back with the gym equipment, yes. Tony threatened to dump them in the wilderness in Montana/Dakota/Idaho/whatever-state-Tony-considered-barren on a regular basis because very little stood up to Steve and Thor in the
middle of a good old fashioned throw down.

Which usually led to Thor wanting beer and a meal. Steve found himself drinking a lot of beer and eating a lot of barfood before noon whenever Thor came around.

“You’re enjoying my home, aren’t you?” Thor said. They were sitting on stairs that led down to the sparring arena. Currently the Warriors were half sparring, half having an argument in the center. Sif was also sitting with them.

“Actually yes, so far.” Steve said. “I haven’t seen too much of Asgard yet, but the people seem real nice and it’s.. If I say I feel like I fit in, would that make sense?”

“Actually, yes.” Thor paused and looked over his shoulder, and blinked. “I have to admit, Son of Coul, I wasn’t expecting to see you for hours.”

“I’m usually up early.” Phil was walking down the stairs, in dojo pants and a muscle shirt, showing the tattoos on his arms. That was something the Avengers had had to get used to: under the suit, Phil Coulson was not quite so proper. Military tattoos were on his right forearm, and his left arm was dominated by a Japanese-style sleeve tattoo, a foo dog and lotus blossoms the primary elements.

“How are you not hung over?” Steve was staring at him.

“I was. I had to sleep in and drink a lot of water, but I feel like I could do with some exercise now.” Phil was browsing the weapons racks. The Warriors Three paused to watch this.

“You mean to fight one of us?” Volstagg asked, sounding almost intrigued.

“I was under the impression that most Midgardians were of minimal strength compared to us.” Hogun said after a long pause. “And that your good Captain was something of an exception.”

“That is true. If you use your full strength on me it’s very possible I won’t be getting back up.” Phil said, picking up a sword and testing the balance. “But, I hold fighting is as much about technique as strength.”

“A man perhaps after your own heart, Sif.” Volstagg called to her. Sif rolled her eyes.

“Oh indeed.” Phil said with a straight face, turning to face them, still holding the sword. “I have long held that the female of the species is far more deadly than the male. Of all my friends, my dear Natasha is the last one I would prefer to have to face in true combat.”

Well, that got him a lot of lifted eyebrows anyway.
Steve half laughed and stood, walking over. “I’ll go a few rounds with you, Phil. Hand to hand though, I’d rather you not have blades.”

He half smiled and put the sword back. “Thank you, Captain Rogers.”

“So, can either of you ride a horse?”

Tony was coffee deprived, but he was pretty sure he’d heard that right. “Ride a horse? Uh, no, why would I know how to ride a horse?”

“I can, but I haven’t since I was a little girl.” Pepper said. The tailors had dropped off more clothing for them, and Pepper was still managing to look absolutely resplendent, wearing a fitted vest over a flowing blouse and fitted breeches tucked into the boots from the day before.

Tony, meanwhile, was LARPing, as far as he was concerned. “And this matters…why?”

Loki shook his head and led them both out of the bedroom. “Food first.”

“Is there coffee?”

“There is not coffee.”

“Your advanced society is starting to look like a slice of my own personal hell.” Tony pouted.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll still take you and Bruce to drool all over the Bifrost later.”

The dining room overlooked the sparring area, as Pepper discovered, working on some kind of fruit pastry and leaning on the windowsill. “Holy shit. Hey guys, Phil’s sparring with one of the Riders of Rohan.”

“I love that that’s now the accepted nickname for them.” Tony said, stepping over and also looking out the window. “That’s Fandral, right?”

“You are correct.” Loki said, and all three winced in unison and said ‘ohhhh’ as Phil was sent to the ground in a way that had to be painful but Phil just was on his feet and charging back in again. “That man is insane.”

“He’s flirting with Sif.”
Both Tony and Loki looked at Pepper, who was still watching the sparring area.

“He is. He’s deliberately showing off to get her attention.” Pepper said, gesturing.

There was a pause as both men considered this, watching the arena. “You know? I agree. I wish him luck on that endeavor. He deserves to get laid.”

“Sif is not an easy woman to impress.” Loki finally said, still watching through the window.

“Well, that works, because neither is Phil.” In fact, now that Tony thinks about it, he’s yet to see Phil impressed. Actually he’s yet to see Phil have much in the way of strong emotions. “So, Sleipnir first, I imagine?”

“Yes. The royal stables. Come along.” Loki led them through the palace, not even thinking about where he was going, letting old memories guide his feet. “This is one of the few legends mortal literature got right, actually.”

“So, no giant snake, no cadre of halfbreed two-footed children?” Pepper asked, finishing her pastry.

“Right. Yes, I did lead a fairly active sex life but I was relatively careful because of the whole royal heirs issue. My two children were unplanned and largely the product of being caught in my own webs of trickery and lies. But you know? I never regretted it.” They stepped outside into a courtyard, walking down a stone path, Loki’s green and black clothing signature enough that the way from them was clear long before they got there. “Certainly it was the brunt of a lot of laughs and jokes. We do have media here, and a prince mothering a horse was certainly worthy of note. At the time, it was spun into the proof of my power. That I was so good with my magic, I could bear children in forms other than my own.”

“So, you are a shapeshifter.” Tony said, looking at him for a moment.

“I was. I lack the power to do it now, especially the big mass manipulations like a horse.” Loki wove it off.

“Wait. Fuck. Wait.” Tony stopped for a moment while his mind went lightspeed working that out. “You lack power to do mass manipulations. You.. just FUCK, are you using the fucking laws of conservation of energy and mass to shapeshift?!”

“There is no magic, just technology that has yet to be understood.” Loki lifted an eyebrow at him, walking up to a palatial stable and opening a door. “It’s just that in this case, the technology is born in. Part of me, or it used to be. This body simply can’t hold the reserves for such spells.”
“You’re fucking theoretical physics in living form.” Tony was still staring.

“Yes.” Loki agreed. “Theoretical to your world, anyway. Are you coming?” Tony hurried to catch up, and they stepped into the stable.

“So, you found a way to fuck math.” Pepper said after a moment, thoughtful. “I’m honestly surprised it took this long, Tony.”

“Yes, yes, and math found a way to fuck me, story of my life really.”

Loki rubbed his eyes. “Why do I love you two?”

“Would you like your list alphabetical or by category?” Pepper smiled at him, and was rewarded with a laugh.

Sleipnir’s stall was open, so Loki led them out a side door into a pasture, whistling piercingly. The sound brought a herd of horses trotting, Sleipnir at the lead, who broke into a gallop and pulled away from the herd when he saw who it was. Loki stood his ground and the giant horse skidded to a halt, planting his head right to Loki’s chest gently and chuffing.

“Yes, yes, I’m visiting for a bit.” Loki’s voice was soft, leaning his forehead down to press his face against Sleipnir’s mane. “I am sorry I so rarely see you, now. I miss you and your brother both.” Sleipnir made a noise that sounded like a whine, one front hoof pawing at one of Loki’s legs as he rubbed his head back and forth against Loki before backing up a half step to regard Tony and Pepper. Tony was greeted with a headbutt that made him grunt, but he scratched Sleipnir’s ears anyway.

“Hey, stepkid. It’s good to see you again. Your dad’s still living with us. This is Pepper, she’s pretty much in charge.” Part of him feels lame for talking to a horse, the rest of him is quite aware that Sleipnir is not a horse, but a something else, and likely understood every word he was saying, the gist if not the exact meaning. Proven by the fact that Sleipnir looked at him, stared at Pepper, then looked at Loki silently.

“Yes, it’s rather true I’m afraid. They’re my family on Midgard. I’d have you with us if I could but you wouldn’t do well there.” Loki had never had any problem talking to his children, and Sleipnir never had any issue making himself understood. He knew his teenaged Pushing-into-adulthood son was worried about being abandoned, forgotten. “And I remain in … unofficial exile from here. This is a… visitation. Perhaps, a goodbye.”

Sleipnir blew out a sigh and rubbed his head into Loki’s chest again before chuffing and turning a remarkably narrow-eyed look on Pepper before taking the half-step sideways towards her and greeting her, ears swiveling out.
“… I have the strange idea that he’s dealing with it but I’m not being called mom anytime soon.” Pepper finally said, stroking careful fingers through Sleipnir’s mane then startling when the stallion tossed his head back and laughed.

“I would say that is a given since I’m his mother.” Loki half smiled. “I would very much like to see your brother as well. I don’t suppose you know where he’s been hiding, lately?”

Sleipnir made a show of sighing, then bowed down, kneeling on his front legs and looking at them all patiently.

“Wait, is this cool? Can he carry us all?” Tony wanted to know even as Loki swung on bareback.

“If he can carry my father with a full battle kit, he can carry the three of us and not feel it. Come on, quit your grousing.”

“I don’t know how to ride horses! You know that!” Tony protested weakly as Loki pulled, Pepper pushed, and somehow they got him seated behind Loki, Pepper swinging on behind him, then Sleipnir was standing and in motion, running through the fields. Tony would have panicked, he really would have, but he could feel muscle moving under him in what had to be the strangest form of locomotion he’d ever dealt with, and his brain got absorbed in drawing up theoretical diagrams and framework. Eight limbs had led to an unbelievably smooth and stable method of movement, and he bookmarked it in his head for later consideration for robots. You never know.

The ride took them out a gate that Sleipnir opened easily, away from the castle and city, into a forest that Tony and Pepper both suspected to house Ents or something equally spectacular. In a funny way they were proven right, because a large dark shadow moved ahead of them and Sleipnir ran to meet it.

All in all, Phil was enjoying this vacation.

And yes, in spite of his earlier remarks, he was considering this one. Being a world removed from his job had had the effect of lifting quite a lot of pressure, and he’d already put forward the requests that SHIELD had had of Asgard. So now, he was free to relax. The wardrobe of the Aesir was rich and high quality, as dignified as his suits but not as monochrome. The tailors had seen his military posture and somehow used it for inspiration, and he suspected he could have passed, quite well, for a captain of the guard here.

But, not currently, because he was still in his exercise clothing, battered, dirty, and in fact still slowly bleeding from a cut on his arm. He paid it no mind, it didn’t even need stitches. Besides, he almost wanted the scar because he’d gotten it in a sparring round with Sif, who’d eventually bested him then promptly asked him if he wanted to play chess.
So here they were. At a table in a garden, flagons of juice at hand and an absolutely tense game of chess between them, only one piece moved each. Phil was suspecting there was subtext, here, some kind of ritual or test that Sif decided to put him through. Only time would tell, but there being possible unspoken stakes did make the game that much more interesting.

“I know we didn’t speak much, during the time that we came to Midgard to find Thor.” Sif finally said, picking up her flagon and watching him look at the board. “But, I must say, your calm impressed me.”

“I have spent my life in battle, often in situations that most of my people would consider … unusual, or perhaps even surreal.” Phil conceded. “I have found that being able to maintain my control, and calm, encourages others to do the same.”

“What do you consider yourself, then? A soldier, a warrior?”

He lifted his eyes from the board. “I am a soldier and a spy.”

Sif quirked an eyebrow, just barely, watching him move his piece. “A spy.”

“Yes. Even now it could be said that much of my work is based on intelligence. There is an old children’s show from my world that says that knowing is half the battle. I would contend that knowing is all the battle but the killing blow.” He laced his hands together, watching her look at the board then move one of her own pieces.

“How did you come to your current position, then?” She asked, watching his face.

“Army Rangers.” Phil tapped one finger against his goblet, considering the board then moving, not surprised when she just blinked. “Part of the military of the particular country I am from. There are many nations on Midgard. The Army is our footsoldiers, the Rangers a bit of an elite guard.”

“You were chosen, I imagine.”

“Yes.”

“I know enough from watching you fight that you’re good at it.” She moved, and he immediately did as soon as her piece hit the board. “This seems to count for your entire party.”

“Well, that really shouldn’t be surprising.”

There was a silence, the pieces moving faster, her pursing her lips slightly as he started sacrificing
pieces as he went on a single minded hunt for her king, harrowing his way across the board.

“When the Man of Iron took us out to eat, and you appeared after supposedly being dead, two of your companions were far and away happy to see you.” Sif said.

“Are you asking what Clint and Natasha are to me?” He replied, his last minor piece falling.

“Yes.”

“They’re family. Not born, but family in blood and word and deed none the less. I am loyal to them, and they to me.” He paused, watching her next move. “But that’s not what you’re asking.”

“You already have to know that this isn’t merely a game of chess.”

“Oh, I did suspect as such. It’s a test. A gauntlet. I passed a test of physical prowess, perhaps, this is one of mental fortitude. Seeing if I meet your standards.” He moved a piece and sat back, watching her stare at the board. “Do I pass, Lady Sif?”

She stared at the board, fingers tapping her goblet, then slowly sat it down, reaching a hand out and toppling her king with one fingertip before getting up. He stood up just fast enough to catch her in his arms, the kiss fierce and consuming and he was only too glad to return it in kind. “You pass.” She said after several moments, breathing the words out against his lips. “That arm should really be seen to. I have a proper first aid kit in my quarters.”

Phil didn’t bother hiding his smile.

Loki was sitting with his back to a tree, Sleipnir on one side and Fenrir on the other, their giant heads competing for attention and space against his comparatively small body, and Tony just felt like he was invading something private and sacred. They were mismatched at best, no obvious relation between them but it still came through. Loki was a very proud doting parent, and had missed them quietly and bitterly, and now was loathe to let them leave his arms.

Tony was certain that when they left Asgard, Loki was going to be depressed for days because he’d consider it a goodbye of certain finality to his children, and that it was just going to do more damage to the tall man’s still-fragile heart and psyche. And that just made him decide it was time for some strong open roads between Midgard and Asgard. It was time to get Midgard on the interstellar highway.

He shoved those thoughts out of his mind, for now. He and Pepper had been pulled into the gathering, one of Sleipnir’s legs across Tony’s lap to keep him in place and Pepper nestled against Fenrir’s thick soft fur. It was a welcome, still awkward but getting there, and he understood just how
important this was, how trusted this meant they were. Tony had never really had a family, not for years, he’d made the Avengers a family of sorts but that was more like a disjointed pack of adopted siblings. As strange as this was, this was more solid, and they were being invited in, and of course he was going to dive right into it, see how it worked, if it could work.

“Of course you realize this is making me wonder about the whole kids question.” Pepper said, fingers threading through Fenrir’s fur and scratching his ears.

“It’s Thor’s turn.” Loki replied without really thinking about it.

“We hadn’t really discussed it before.” Tony said, and his tone made Loki look at them both, blinking. “I mean don’t get me wrong, I like kids, but I’m not young anymore and I’m going to be lucky to see sixty.”

“Tony.” Pepper said in a gently chiding voice.

“What? Doesn’t seem fair to a kid is all.”

“You two are younger than you’ll ever know.” Loki murmured. “But, sixty? Not even twenty more years?”

“I have a cluster of shrapnel constantly trying to shred my heart. This pretty thing in my chest is protecting me, but it is a reactor, and it is compromising the integrity of my ribcage if you think about it.” He rattled his fingers on it restlessly.

“If you think I’m going to let you die anytime soon you’re sorely mistaken.” Loki was staring at him.

Pepper shook her head. “Too maudlin a topic, but this did seem like the right time to ask.”

“Now I’m thinking about it.” Tony sighed and slouched against Sleipnir, smiling when he got headbutted.

“Fenrir is not opposed to a larger pack.” Loki said after a moment. “Sleipnir agrees.”

“Okay are we really talking about this?” He looked between Loki and Pepper. “I get that you want to avoid the whole royal heir issue man, which I guess just means it’d be my kid not yours.”

“I assumed that anyway. I’m the late addition. Yours was an established relationship. Also I’m not sure just how genetically compatible we are. I’m still a different species.”

“Well then, am I making honest men out of you both sometime soon?” Pepper quirked an eyebrow,
smiling when they both did, the tension that had gathered easing out just as quickly.

“If we start wearing rings in public the media will ask awkward questions.” Tony clicked his tongue.

“Fuck’em.” Pepper’s voice was flat, then she started laughing when both Fenrir and Sleipnir turned their heads to stare at her, Loki giving her an utterly disapproving look. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Young ears, darling.” He chided. “Perhaps we should discuss this seriously after this trip. We do have a habit of talking about things too late.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“And since we’re discussing legacies, this afternoon I’m willing to take you and Bruce out to the Bifrost, if nothing else comes up. “

Tony grinned and shifted to throw his arms around Loki. “Best boyfriend ever.”

“Heimdall will not approve of course.” He was thoughtful. “But then, he hasn’t approved of anything involving me since I froze him solid, when everything was happening.”

“Yeah, that is a good way to piss someone off.” Pepper stared at him.

Loki shrugged with wide arms. “It made sense at the time.”

“Your future epitaph, right there man.” Tony grinned when Loki didn’t even argue, and somehow managed not to let his mind get caught up in space travel again even as the math machine started trying to crunch numbers. Right here, right now was more important. Sometimes it paid to not get ahead of yourself. Not that he was good at that.
Chapter 5

Loki and Tony found Bruce in the gardens, sprawled on his back in the grass, staring up at the sky. It was a public area and a pair nearby were playing harp and violin, respectively, continuing to lead to the overwhelmingly surreal air Asgard had in Tony’s opinion. Because it really did seem like he’d stepped into Lord of the Rings, then he’d catch sight of a flicker of something like a holographic display. Or, in this case, a gloriously colorful holographic tattoo on the violinist’s arm and hand that fluxed with the music.

“I don’t get it. Type two society and riding horses.” Tony remarked sideways to Loki.

“Different societal progression curves.” Loki replied. “We don’t appreciate the same kind of flash Midgardians do, I suppose. We live long lives, little changes quickly. Technology is everywhere, it’s just in the cracks, I suppose.”

“I’ve already caught on that the fires that appear to be lighting everything aren’t actually fires.” Tony had passed his hand through one, the night before, and found no heat there.

“I figured that out.” Bruce said, lifting a hand for attention.

“Do tell, big science.” Tony walked over and sat in the grass by him. He’d taken the time to get his backpack from Loki’s room, so now Jarvis was with him, the mobile module silently observing for now.

“It’s a decentralized grid. Instead of having outlets, entire surfaces of the buildings provide power. It’s like, oh. If we stuck a magnet to a fridge and the magnet lit up.” Bruce made gestures as he spoke. “There’s power all through the palace, but it’s only half the equation. You need the other half to get light.”

“Ten points to Gryffindor.” Loki applauded, making Bruce laugh.

“Seriously? It’s that simple?” Tony blinked. “Seems.. expensive? Like it’d be hard to repair?”

“It has to do with how the walls themselves are made. It’s not hard, or expensive.” Loki was grinning like a madman, because he was genuinely impressed someone had figured it out. “How did you figure it out?”

“Spent about half an hour moving one of the lamps in my room around, figuring out where I could put it where it’d turn on.” Bruce sat up and smiled sheepishly.

“Guess and check. Classy.” Tony grinned. “So. Want to check out the Bifrost with us?”
He looked at Tony over the rims of his glasses. “Is that a trick question? When?”

“Now? I mean, unless you want to hang out a bit longer.”

“Nah. It is a peaceful place though.”

Loki helped them both to their feet, and they started to walk, catching a lift up to the level the bifrost started on. There was a construction barrier, Loki cheerfully hopped it to step onto the translucent rainbow material, and Tony and Bruce followed his example, the three men strolling along the length of it.

“So who actually broke this thing?”

“Thor did, but it’s my fault.” Loki replied. “I’d basically turned it into the Death Star to annihilate Jotunheim.”

“We’ve hopelessly corrupted you. That’s two modern media references in short order.” Tony clicked his tongue. “This go back to getting caught in your own nets?”

“Basically.” Loki shrugged. “My insanity had broken through, I suppose. It’s still my fault, of course, but… perhaps things would have been different if someone had said something. Done something. Pointed out that the second prince was off in his own mind. Everyone knew. No one said.”

There was a few moments of silence as they walked, Bruce pausing to walk to the edge and stare out. “We’re moving faster than we should be.”

Tony stopped and looked back, then looked forward. “Yeah. We are. We’re way farther out than what we’ve actually walked.”

Loki was laughing. “Oh yes. This will be so very fun to watch.”

The construction crew wasn’t actively working when the trio showed up, and it only took Loki speaking to a moment to a man that Tony figured had to be a foreman of some variety before they were taken to a temporary structure set up on the road itself, which was apparently the work office.

“The road itself is done, we’re reconstructing the gate.” Said the foreman, watching with curious eyes as Tony and Bruce both froze up, staring around because the structure on the inside was just plastered with plans.
“Well, then.” Tony said after a moment, taking a set of glasses off the top of his head and putting them on, smiling a bit when they powered up. They were a set of the combat HUD glasses Loki had built, of course Tony had gotten a pair and it was only natural he’d synched them up with the mobile Jarvis module. “Jarvis, you with me?”

“Of course sir.” The backpack responded, making the foreman jump.

“Good. Start paying attention because we need to save all of this.” Tony popped his knuckles, exchanged a grin with Bruce, and started working their way around the room.

In a way, there was something spectacular in the sheer familiarity of it all. While the system of measurement was slightly unfamiliar (but very similar to metric, actually, and they got the hang of it quickly), the way all of the drawings were put together was very classic, blueprints and blown out schematics. Once they got used to the style of it all, it came with ease, for a few minutes, just long enough to realize they’d suddenly been allowed to sit at the grown up’s table at Thanksgiving.

“Okay so bringing it down to layman’s, this is an interstellar highway and you guys broke your on and off ramp.” Tony said. “But you’ve got the country backroads going and that’s working for whatever commerce and business is necessary.”

“Something like that.” Loki agreed, sitting on a work table with his ankles crossed, watching this all with a bemused smile. The conversation Tony and Bruce had been having as they went through the designs had been half in words, half in math spoken aloud. “Are you going to let us in on this project now?”

“I already told you. I want to start a cross-company project and get space travel going for Midgard.” Tony said, wanting his wireframe software so bad it was insane, so he could project all these plans in layers and connect them up right. “Can we get a copy of these? Is there a workshop we can use?”

“Yes, and yes.” Loki said, well aware the foreman was put out with them cluttering up his workspace and not caring too much either. “I honestly want to see if you can replicate this on Midgard.” He said finally. “This technology is far beyond what your world is using. What your world is ready for.”

Tony pointed at him. “See, that? That is a challenge. And yeah I know. I don’t understand how this thing works. Yet. That’s a definite yet.”

“We’re going to have a hell of a good time figuring it out though.” Bruce smiled. “Though I’ve already figured out that the sheer power demand of such a device…”

“Well it’s a good thing I have my own brand of reactor then isn’t it? So, Loki? This lab we can supposedly use? Lead the way.” Once they’d left the structure and were walking back toward town, Tony stated talking. “Look, I don’t want to get too into what I want to do until we have Wayne and
Richards on the line, but two things need to happen here. We need to have better transportation between Asgard and Midgard, and we need to be able to start exploring our solar system with less trepidation.”

“You’re really throwing your weight into this.” Bruce looked at him. “I mean, no offense, but this is like a recent obsession for you.”

He blew out a sigh. “Legacy. A hundred years from now, when someone opens a history book, and finds STARK industries, I don’t want the lead line to be weapons production. I don’t even want it to be Iron Man. I want it to be space travel. Even better if it says that two competing companies like STARK and Wayne Enterprises set aside differences to make it happen.”

“You know Bruce Wayne, right?” Loki said, honestly curious.

“Well, we’re not facebook friends or anything. Well, we might be.” Tony blinked. “You get what I mean. But we’ve moved in the same circles for years and we’re often accused of being cut from the same cloth. Eccentric billionaires who inherited their fortunes. Dead parents tragically young. It’s like a blueprint for fucked up genius.”

“What, is he a hero too?” Loki almost laughed, then saw Tony’s expression. So did Bruce.

“I know that expression. What?” Bruce wanted to know.

“Look, a few years ago, Bruce Wayne disappeared. Came back with some real familiar eyes, you get me?” Tony looked between them. They’d stopped, all turned to face each other. “I can’t prove anything, but he came back different. Noticeably, I mean at least to me. He tries to maintain the playboy billionaire thing but reputations, years to make seconds to lose right?”

“Oh shit. He is a hero.” Loki was staring at Tony.

“Maybe.” Tony conceded. “See, shortly after he came back, Gotham got its own masked creeper. A guy named Batman, who works semi-casually with the police when it suits him but otherwise seems to fit into the masked vigilante school of heroism, like Spiderman. Secret identities and all that shit. But he’s bankrolled, obviously bankrolled. I can’t prove anything, but I’m pretty sure Wayne’s involved.”

“Does SHIELD know any of this?” Bruce asked after a moment.

“I have no idea and I’m not planning to ask. I mean, it’s his business.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “I don’t want him for his possible BDSM alter ego, I want him for his brains and corporation. I mean the guy’s basically a CEO but he works R&D and he’s got good people. He’d be invaluable to this little project, if he decides he has time.”
“And Reed Richards? He’s a public hero, from what Jarvis told me.” Loki said.

“Right. The Fantastic Four are like the Avengers in that they don’t have secret identities. And Reed would be good to have because not only is he a multiple doctorate brilliant guy, he’s an astronaut. Space is kind of his thing, it’s how he became metahuman actually.” Tony scratched at his goatee.

“This is going to be very, very interesting.” Bruce finally said.

“Well, yeah, of course it is. We’re involved.” Tony blinked at him.

Loki laughed softly and resumed walking, letting them catch up.

If Asgard’s capital was something out of insert-your-fantasy-novel-here, then the workshop that Loki took them to was out of Tony’s wildest dreams that happened to have been fueled by absinthe and Star Trek. He actually went weak in the knees after he walked in, staring around with starstruck eyes then tossing his arms around Loki’s neck and mumbling something only half coherent in thanks before losing himself for hours, Bruce beside him the whole time.

The Jarvis module and the unfolded wireframe suitcase were a first year art student’s attempts amongst the Louvre, and Jarvis himself said that while he saw the computers around him, saw the wireless network, he couldn’t find the right language to talk to them in. They were just moving too fast, for him, and Jarvis actually sounded very ashamed when he said he was pretty sure that he was being laughed at.

Which led directly to Tony standing in the center of the room, looking at an array of displays, wearing his VR gloves and the glasses.

“Okay. If the people here have AllSpeak, then dammit, so do you. Jarvis says there’s AI here, and I agree, and I will be damned if I let you bully my best most precious boy.” Tony said, talking to the machines around him without any real concern. “So. I’d really love it if you spoke to me about this. I know you’re light years ahead of anything I’m doing, so trust me. This is as close to meeting god as I’m ever going to get in my short Midgardian life. Talk to me.”

There was silence in the room, besides the humming and whirring of fans and electricity. Bruce was leaning on a wall next to the wire frame setup, which was currently full of scans of the Bifrost, a 3D model being slammed together rapidfire and calculations running, the Jarvis module leaning against it.

“Loki?” Tony finally said, looking over his shoulder and brow drawing together.
“No. You’re right.” Loki said. “There is an AI, though not exactly in the form as you would understand. Our AIs are grown, not programmed.”

“That is just enough information to drive me insane.” Tony decided, turning back to the displays and setting a hand on one, the crystal clear screen shimmering slightly under the contact.

There was a long silence, then the displays in front of Tony changed with a mercurial fluidity, words coming up in front of him.

**Why should we bother?**

“Well, hello there, thank you for deigning to show up.” Tony faked shock.

**If you’re going to be petulant, Midgardian, we shall continue to ignore you.**

“Tch. You have not begun to see me being petulant. Why should you bother, well.” He nodded side to side. “Because I just met you and I love you. How’s that?”

The screens mixed up in front of him, reforming back to one word.

**Explain.**

“My name is Anthony Stark. I’m an inventor from Midgard. An innovator. Our technology is still way behind Asgard, and what I have is still considered advanced.” He wove his hand back at the wireframe display, at Jarvis. “My first love is computers. Robots. AIs. I basically pioneered a new kind of AI. I made Jarvis. What I have with me is a splinter of him, mind you.” He pressed his hands together, watching the displays in front of his eyes dance and shift. “I’m here because I want to learn. Because I want to cut the razor’s edge that much sharper. I want to change Midgard, and what you know, what Asgard knows, is something I want to be able to deliver to the doorstep of our own people.”

**You desire to learn.**

“Yes. Absolutely. Anything, but what I’m keenly interested is the Bifrost. And you. What should I call you?”

**We do not have names as you would understand, nor are we “AI” as you understand. We are not artificial, we are natural, but we are organized, cultured to do this. We live and we die as part of a collective network.**

“It’s a bee hive.” Bruce blinked.
Tony didn’t even have words, gloved fingertips caressing along the edge of the displays, and watching it Loki found it remarkably similar to how Tony touched him, or Pepper. Tony wasn’t kidding when he said this was his first love, but Loki had known that for a very long time, and couldn’t bring himself to be jealous. “Can I give you a nick name then, just something to use when I want to address you, over the next few days?” Tony finally said, because he already knew he was going to spend as much time here as he could.

We find that acceptable.

“Morpheus.” Bruce said suddenly. “The dream king, and the man that led Neo into the Matrix.”

Tony snapped and pointed at Bruce. “Yes. Perfect.”

I believe we have worked out an algorithm that will allow us to converse with your artificial intelligence.

“Even better. So, you willing to do this?”

The displays eased away to blank again, but Tony’s fingertips helplessly caressed along the edges of the screens again, wordlessly begging. Then, to his utter shock, the STARK Industries logo started popping up across the screens, the JARVIS ONLINE words under it sending a thrill through him, grinning wide. “Hey, Jarvis. Welcome to the future.”

“We have a lot of work to do sir.” Jarvis replied, voice echoing around the room.

“No time like the present.” He looked over his shoulder at Bruce and Loki. “Am I doing this alone?”

“Never.” Loki jumped off the table he was sitting on, moving up with Tony as Bruce did, settling into their usual lineup. “Where do you want to start?”

And so the rest of the days on Asgard fell into a rhythm, of sorts, spending the mornings with Loki’s children, the afternoons and evenings buried in the lab and dinner as a group. At night Tony and Loki fell in bed with Pepper, who held them both and smiled as she listened to Tony try to explain what he was learning, the glimpse of something wonderful he was being shown, that he was trying to learn. He still only had a handful of puzzle pieces versus the entire picture.

It was actually their fourth day on Asgard that Tony, during a meal, realized that Sif had somehow invaded the Three Musketeers arrangement that was usually Clint, Natasha, and Phil, and they were all talking avidly but it was clear that the interaction was primarily Phil and Sif, a strange secret smile on Phil’s face that Tony had never seen before. He’d elbowed Pepper and pointed it out, and Pepper
had given him her Tony-you’re-failing-at-human-interaction-again smile. He’d pouted, and left them alone.

That was the same day Odin had decided to speak to Tony.

“The hivemind has taken a shine to you.” Was how Odin greeted him. Loki had pried both he and Bruce out of the workshop, and they were in the gardens. Tony had seen Odin walk in and caught the look, and had decided to get it over with.

“I’m glad, because it’s fascinating.” Tony replied. “So, is this the ‘break my son’s heart and I kill you slowly’ speech?”

Odin gave him a strange look. “I needn’t concern myself with that, because frankly if you did do such to Loki, I doubt you’ll live long enough for me to do any damage.”

“Fair enough.” Tony conceded. “Wasn’t planning on doing so anyway. So, what then?”

“Do you really think Midgard can handle what you are trying to take to them?” Odin’s tone was serious as the grave. “You want to give your world the Bifrost. I do not think your people are anywhere near ready for the responsibility.”

“We never are.” Tony shrugged.

“Then why not wait?”

“Because that’s not how we learn. Look, we weren’t ready for computers, not really. Not ready for reactors. Or the bomb. Or dynamite. Hell we probably weren’t ready for fire. But the fascinating thing, the really great wonderful thing, about my planet is that we adapt better than almost anything else. We have short lifespans and things are changing so fast now that it’s nearly defying reason, but we still manage to keep up.” Tony canted his head. “So, are we ready for real space travel? To join in this great interstellar society you guys have going on? To crash your party? Pft, no. Do I want us to anyway? Yes, more than I can put to words.”

Odin stared at him. “You realize there are many ways this could go wrong.”

“And so many ways it could go right.” He replied without missing a beat. “I mean if nothing else we can get two way travel with Asgard. “

“And that isn’t the only place. This is what you don’t seem to understand. This isn’t just the bifrost, it’s a signal flare to all of the universe that your planet is, ahem, changing its game to play at a more advanced level. That might bring allies to your door. It might bring enemies.”
“And since we’ve decided we want to play with the grown-ups, you’re not going to be our babysitter.” Tony finished.

“Crass, but accurate.” Odin nodded.

There was a pause, then Tony sighed and nodded. “Consider your warning delivered… but I can’t help but think that in this case, the potential reward outweighs the potential risk. Maybe everything goes wrong and maybe it gets some new bad guys at our doorstep and maybe, just maybe it ends up turning into something terrible. But at least, at least we’ll have gone out trying to do something brilliant. Trying to advance ourselves, our planet. Instead of going out muddled in wars based in religion, or destroying ourselves with greed and pollution.”

There was another pause as Odin just stared at him in a way Tony frankly found unnerving as all hell, then reached out and clasped one of his shoulders before walking away silently, leaving Tony to wonder what the hell had just happened.

It was the next afternoon that Bruce found a breakthrough that let the scattering of puzzle pieces they’d figured out line up and start forming a coherent picture.

Bruce was deep into the Bifrost plans, looking at programming and diagrams and calculations, when he’d suddenly gone still and stared before snapping his fingers at Tony. “Hey. Come look at this.”

Tony had stepped over, watching Bruce manipulate the display and change the focus. The display was showing what could best be described as a fractal of interleaving math equations (yes a fractal was math anyway but the visual display was the important part, here), and as he zoomed it in, three math equations in a triangle formation came front and center. “Huh.” Tony finally said, staring at it, Loki shifting to look over their shoulders. “That’s… wait…”

Bruce looked at him, patiently waiting until he saw Tony’s eyes light up. “I’m pretty sure it’s perpetual motion.”

“That’s atomically impossible.” Tony sputtered in response, still staring at the screen. “This is base code for something, obviously, which part.”

“That’s the problem, and the other thing I worked out. We’ve been trying to look at this thing in pieces but I think the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Bruce took a deep breath. “You can’t break this thing down and simplify it. You can’t just say, okay, here’s the gate, here’s the power source, because all of it is one in the same. It’s that self-referential.”

“Fifty points to Gryffindor.” Loki said quietly.
Both of them turned to look at Loki, then Tony grinned. “So, is this revenge for making you prove yourself in my labs?”

“I told you, Stark. I wanted to see if you could figure it out. That meant not giving you hints.”

“Right. I love you anyway.” He looked back at the screen, staring at the equations. “Can we simulate what happens when this runs?”

“Just a moment, sir.” Jarvis replied, and the math started running on the screen.

“It’s a machine.” He said, watching it with widening eyes. “It’s, it’s like the mathematic version of a fission reactor. Once touched off it’ll keep going and even ramp up.”

“Not quite perpetual motion.” Bruce said. “But for a remarkably low steady input you’d get one hell of an output off of it.”

“This is really, really fucking important.” He sat back, still staring at it. “Actually, I think we just found our rosetta stone, big science. Great work.”

“I’m willing to throw in what I know, now. I just wanted you to take the first steps yourself.” Loki said.

“If you just tell us, we won’t learn.” Tony replied. Bruce smiled a little. “But, we’re running short on time. I’m not sure we can afford to turn down the assistance.”

“Not if we want to know enough to replicate this.” Bruce said.

Loki smiled and ruffled a hand through both of their hairs. “Fine then. On the condition that on the last day of this trip, you shut it down and be more social.”

“I guess that’s fair.” Tony said. “Teach us about the force, Obi Wan.”

From there, things started clicking in. Yeah, Tony kept feeling like there was something tantalizingly just out of his reach, just out of the corner of his perception, but now he had solid groundwork and was actually understanding it. With Loki gently pushing them in the right direction, finally understanding just what the Bifrost was, and the implications of it, was like several epiphanies in a row. And each one just solidified the fact, to him, that Earth needed this, needed to get on the interstellar highway.
“Don’t get me wrong, I’m down for this.” Clint remarked. It was their last day, which had come suddenly, and after spending as much time with his children as Loki thought was possible they were gathering back up. They were either departing that evening or early the next morning, it was being discussed. That evening most likely. “I like it here, honestly, and I want to come back, but where the hell would you put a bifrost on earth? I mean revolutionary technology has a bad habit of starting wars.”

“Detroit.” Tony replied.

There was a long silence as everyone looked at him. It was before dinner and they’d loosely gathered in the gardens, still decked out in local attire. As it was each of them had gotten a travel trunk that held a week’s wardrobe and then some. The tailors seemed to like the excuse.

“That’s… brilliant.” Phil said after several moments.

“Well thank you Phil I’ll take that as a high compliment.” Tony grinned at him.

“I’ve never been to Detroit.” Steve said, thoughtful.

“Nor would you want to, right now.” Natasha said. “Frankly I see his point, just from the fact that it’d be impossible to do anything to Detroit that hasn’t already been done. If you put aerial footage of Detroit, and Sarajevo, side by side, it’s pretty difficult to tell the difference. If the bifrost blows up, nothing lost.”

“Thank you for that scintillating support.” Bruce said, utterly droll.

“Yeah, my shit rarely blows up unless I want it to.” Tony said, mildly affronted.

Pepper was thoughtful. “You’re going to have to give one hell of a pitch to the board.”

“The pitch the board will hear is about the new line of phones and hardened laptops, because I am bringing back the AK lines. Phil? You want to be our official torture test? I figure if it can survive the standard durability tests AND you…” Tony looked at him.

“As long as I don’t have to be in any video.” Phil replied without missing a beat. “Well, fine, I’m certain you have plans for youtube so we’ll discuss that further later but no official commercials.”

“That’s fine. So, my boring business aside, what are the plans for tonight? I assume there’s plans?”

“Yes, actually.” Thor said. “I believe there are plans for a bonfire. Meat roasting on a spit over it, music, dancing perhaps.”
“Sounds excellent.” Steve grinned. “And sounds like one hell of a sendoff. Your family’s been very kind to us this week, Thor.”

“It is nothing! We are glad to do it. They are glad to know who I fight beside and see with their own eyes that you are all strong, competent warriors and good friends to a man.” Thor slapped Steve’s back. “And I have enjoyed watching you all get comfortable in my home. Our fashions work well for everyone.”

“He said, lying through his teeth.” Clint smirked and looked at Tony, who was still failing to look natural in local clothing. Tony flipped him off.

“Some more than others.” Thor conceded, to a round of laughter. “Come, everyone, I will show you were we are holding the festivities tonight.”

Loki remembered, vividly, the last bonfire he’d been to on Asgard. They were generally for festivals, solstices or royal birthdays or whatever else, and it worked out to roughly six a year. He’d always enjoyed the lack of formality, watching everyone dress down and tear into food and get marked with soot and smoke. They held them in the palace’s largest courtyard, where a permanent firepit stood, and as evening fell everyone gathering, even Odin and Frigga arriving to watch the semi-chaos that always seemed to happen when Asgardians gathered.

He was coming to realize he was going to miss this place, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about it. There were stone benches scattered through the area and he was seated on one, Tony sitting on the ground leaning back into the cradle his legs made, Pepper sitting next to him, she with a goblet of wine, Tony with a single small cup of liquor. They were all watching the firepit get stacked, Bruce and Clint helping a few of the locals.

“It’s nice to see Bruce this relaxed.” Pepper remarked, breaking their comfortable silence. One of her hands was carding Tony’s hair, Loki could feel his little pleased noises through his legs, as the sounds were entirely drowned out by the din. “Yes, it is.” Loki agreed, draining his wine, then looking up when Thor came over with a torch propped on his shoulder.

“Father wanted to know if you desired to light this fire, Loki.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “How ceremonial.” He untangled himself and stood, holding a hand out for the metal shaft of the currently cold torch, feeling the weight of the fuel in it Thor passed it off.

“Need a light?” Tony wanted to know, shifting to sit on the bench where he’d been.

“No. I really don’t think so.” Loki replied, opening the valve and letting the fuel soak the wick before cupping it in his hand. It took focus, because fire was just so goddamn contrary to what he
was, he was ice, he was winter, but even he needed warmth and he’d been raised alongside the
electrical spark of Thor, and the flames curled in his hand, the wick lighting off. He held the torch up
over his head in the waning daylight, and the crowd started going quiet, the din lowering as everyone
pulled back a bit from the fire pit.

“You’re getting some power back by being here, aren’t you?” Pepper asked, looking at him.

He could only smile and shrug. “Perhaps.” He propped the torch on his shoulder, like Thor had, and
went to the firepit. There was a network of kindling along the outer edge, just inside the stone, and
he held the torch down, walking and letting it catch as he moved, lighting off an outer ring. By the
time he’d paced back to start, the fire had caught and the blaze leapt, the bonfire roaring to life to a
raucous cheer from the gathered people. He put the torch in a holder nearby, looking up when Thor
joined him again.

“Father would return your strength, restore your godhood.” Thor finally said, looking at the fire,
arms folded and standing beside him. “He told me he was considering it. That he thought you’d
made great strides.”

“And?” Loki tucked a stray bit of hair behind one ear, glancing sideway at him.

“I bid him stay his hand. Told him that, in my opinion, if you desire that you’ll ask for it, because
you are more comfortable in your skin now than I have ever known, in our long lives. And if that
amounts to your new life being a candle in the wind next to mine, so be it. I would rather have my
brother happy for a short life than miserable for a long one.”

He went still, a few things lining up in his mind, this statement from Thor running head on into
Tony’s somber commentary about not even living twenty more Midgardian years. “There is
something I would discuss with you, later. But this is not the time for serious words.”

Thor grinned and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Agreed! Let us be merry, brother, for we are
lucky bastards, in the end.”

Loki laughed, and went willingly along with Thor, even as his mind turned and his mental drawing
desk was cleared for a new project.

After that, the night was a blur, the fire burning high, the courtyard thick with the smell of fire and
roasting meat and ale, the Asgardians watching with baffled laughter as their Midgardian guests fell
into something primal and hard from their own world, starting to go around the fire in a dizzy
laughing circle and pulling others in with them until it was most of the crowd in a hot feral tide.

“Oldest kind of circle pit there is.” Tony said, laughing, hands linked with Loki and Pepper to keep
track of them. “Now we just need some drums and fire dancers and we’ve got Burning Man.”
“Have you ever even been to Burning Man?” Clint wanted to know.

“Uh, twice. I think.” Tony blinked, the circle was slowing, people grabbing drinks, passing tankards.

“Wait when was this?” Pepper blinked.

“No, it was Burning Man once, Coachella twice.” Tony decided.

“Fucking hell, how stoned were you?” Phil wanted to know, appearing with an entire goddamn bottle of liquor in his hand, already open.

“How drunk are you?” Tony countered.

“I’m not, yet.”

“Good, pass that over here. I think I can have more than one tonight.” Tony accepted the bottle by the neck and took a belt straight from the bottle, hacking after as it burned like saccharine acid.

“Could you two get more redneck right now?” Bruce wanted to know, taking the bottle from Tony and knocking back three long swallows. “Holy shit.” He gasped after.

“Oh, yes, this will end well.” Clint took the bottle and belted some back then passed it to Natasha without a word.

“Hey.” Phil protested rather flatly, watching ‘his’ booze disappear as it was passed team member to team member, Steve cheerfully killing the last of the bottle and chucking it into the fire, making it leap several feet.

Pepper knew, from the budget that was listed monthly to maintain the rumpus room, that the Avengers could drink. She knew their drinking preferences as well, and had been pleased that they had all helped gently encourage Tony to stay out of the bottle. It was a quiet demon that he still wrestled with, though less now than he used to. This all said, she had never seen the whole group drunk at once, largely because she’d never seen Bruce touch alcohol at all and Steve metabolized so fast that there wasn’t really a point in him trying.

But, here they all were, loosely gathered sitting on the ground and on benches near a bonfire. The Riders of Rohan were also there, and Sif, who was sitting close to Phil, the pair saying little but it seemed that they didn’t really have to. They were a close-knit little patchwork family these days, she knew, the Avengers were all people who’d only had a few trustworthy people in their lives or none and all and they’d all latched onto each other like they could save each other from drowning.
And maybe they had.

Of course, trying to get ready to leave while drunk was somewhat confusing unto itself, though happily everyone had packed up. They were discussing how to move everything to their departure point, as they all now had what was basically a steamer trunk apiece of custom Asgardian fashion and no one was willing to part with any of it (alien haute couture? Who could blame them), when some of the fantastically hidden technology of the palace abruptly showed itself.

The air lit up in a thousand liquid shimmers, flowing glitters of moonlight winking into being and swirling in a candycane twist around Tony, who went still and watched this before lifting a hand and passing it through the lights, watched them flow around and over his fingers with an easy tipsy smile. Everyone else went quiet and watched this curiously, Thor and Loki with identical incredulous expressions.

“It is rare that the Hivemind shows itself in form or sound in the halls.” Thor said, folding his arms.

“I’ve only seen and spoken to it through the screens.” Tony replied, holding his arms out to his sides and smiling as it twirled around him again. “Is this a goodbye, then?”

The lights coalesced into a few bright motes at head height, a few bright sparkles coming out to touch his face, hot and feather-light. **Yes. It would have been remiss of us to let you leave without a proper goodbye.** The voice, and it was a voice Tony thought but he wouldn’t have been able to describe it if he was held at gunpoint, it shook the air and he felt it down to his bones. He lifted a hand to touch the lights, and they went supernova and winked out, leaving him half-blind from the flash and dazed, fingers still tingling with the sensation.

“Nanotech?” Bruce asked after a moment.

“It doesn’t matter.” Tony replied, having sat on his trunk of clothing, rubbing his fingertips together then looking up at a concerned Loki. “As strange as this probably sounds… I think I just met god.”

Loki only smiled, messed Tony’s hair up more, and wandered off to find some palace staff to help with the trunks.
“Warm it up. Daddy’s home.”

The lab level had started warming up the very moment Tony had stepped onto the elevator, Loki with him and Bruce using the stairs, but Jarvis obligingly brought the lights to full, coffee pots hissing pungent steam as they worked. There were three of them lined up in Tony’s part of the workshop, each with a custom paintjob and different mugs denoting ownership. “And welcome back, sir. How was your trip?”

“Educating and full of booze that I should never, ever touch again.” Tony left the rolling wireframe setup in the hall and toted the backpack in with him, setting it on his worktable and turning it on. “I need you to get reacquainted with yourself but take it slow, I actually reformatted things to shove more data in there.”

“Noted, sir. Might I ask for a prioritized list of tasks?”

“Yeah, good point.” Bruce walked in, sitting on a rolling stool as Loki did, all three of them turning and picking their mugs up from the coffee makers and turning back. Loki had long stopped thinking about the strange choreographed dances they seemed to do. “We have a lot of data, a lot of plans, and a lot of work to do. A lot of coordination is going to be required, and a lot of resources.”

“Yeah okay.” Tony agreed, pointing at one of his monitors that went to a dark screen with numbered bullet points. “As eager as I am to dig into the bifrost there’s a list of things we have to do first.”

“What kind of timeline do you think we’re looking at?”

“For the bifrost? If we’re lucky, time to construction start is inside of a year, time to facility completion about a decade. Depends how many backers we get on board with this. Yes, Wayne, Richards and us three are going to be the central braintrust, or that’s my intent anyway but I want a lot of financial backing. That means Microsoft, Apple, every big corporate name possible. NASA, CERN, every big scientific organization we can. I want this worldwide and free market and it’s going to be like organizing a science-themed NATO party. It’s going to be interesting even getting SI’s board, well, on board which brings us back to the first step.”
“Phones and laptops?” Loki asked, sipping his coffee. Tony liked his black with barely any sugar, Loki liked cream and a touch of cinnamon.

“Right. Come to that, a question for you Jarvis, how’d our little experiment go?”

“What did you do?” He deadpanned, watching an array of advertisements come up.

“Jarvis and I made mockup advertisements for the new STARK phone and the AK laptops and I had Jarvis leak them to the internet while we were gone. Reliable anonymous source from inside the company, all that. Even a clever little thirty second video to youtube, half CSPAN footage of me using an old model, then it going to computer rendering and rock music overlay, you know, classic advertising crap.”

“Your advertising department is going to have kittens.” Bruce said, staring at everything as it popped up on the screens, the video playing on low volume. “Aren’t initial messages supposed to be very carefully controlled or something?”

“Supposed to be. This is testing the water. This is our really serious attempt at an iPhone competitor right?” Tony shrugged. “So, here’s where we are with regards to these projects. We think we have the hardware issues hammered out. I want us to have fully working prototypes working for next year’s CES trade show in Vegas.”

“That’s a deadline of, like, seven weeks.” Bruce tapped a finger on his mug.

“We’ve worked with much harder deadlines. Really, Loki, what you did with the combat glasses gave me some very good cues on where to take these phones as well as the screens of the new laptops.”

“So if the hardware’s supposedly ready what’s next? Visuals?” Loki asked, moving the backpack as Jarvis started bringing the wireframes of the laptop and phone, pulling them over closer to where he was sitting and looking at them.

“Right, outer casing, lines and coloration. I realize this isn’t exactly why I brought you into the lab but you’re good at this.”

“Well, what drives Midgardians to buy things is kind of fascinating. And as you said, I’d have had
more success conquering the world financially instead of militarily.” He smiled a bit. “Give me an idea of what you want.”

“Clean lines, simple, pleasing, maybe a little bit of art deco kitsch but not overtly so, just enough to catch the eye. Comfortable to handle. I realize that a handheld clear screen isn’t too much to work with, do what you can.”

“I’m on it. How fast do you want the first mockup?”

Tony cleared his throat. “Well, I figure Pepper will be down here yelling about the internet leak as soon as the first meetings are out, so…”

“Sweet Valhalla and Hel…” Loki cursed, grabbing his mug and running for his own office.

“Inconsiderate arse.” Loki muttered, setting his mug down and stepping into the space that was now his worktable. “Haven’t been in my office for most of a Midgardian month and now he expects a functional prototype that looks good in a handful of hours. Jarvis, playlist, fast tempo. Are you caught up with the bifrost information or are you able to assist me?”

“I am able to assist you, Mr. Laufeyson.”

From there, Loki lost track of time, rapidly adapting to his new workspace and thinking out loud. He had Jarvis bring up relative sizes of current cell phones and dismissed current models as too large, going for something that could fit in the rear pocket of a pair of jeans. His screen size ended up being something more square than rectangle, with soft rounded off corners and he had Jarvis work on kicking out the screen and the circuitry as he went to work on a case. Batteries weren’t something they could manufacture in this lab easily, so he accepted that this was a first attempt and was likely to be torn apart and largely have everything changed, and used a current STARK phone battery, resigned that the battery itself would have to be extraneous to the phone design until they got the right one fabbed up.

The rest of the phone arrived in his lab just as he had settled on a rough case, more or less the edge holding everything together, and he sent that off to the machine shop as he assembled the rest of it. The screen being see through, and being roughly 82% of the phone, put him under some pretty tight restrictions for design. He made notes about making the thing fifteen percent thicker, cussed colorfully about the battery issue, but by god it booted up with StarkPad software running on it (with
The case had just been dropped into his hands, still hot from being machined, when he heard the elevator open and heard the prim click of Pepper’s heels. He had Jarvis turn his music down and tried to listen in as he clicked the steel case together, calling the appropriate screwdriver to his hand and setting the screws.

“You’ll love what you can’t see?” Pepper’s voice wanted to know. “Seriously, Tony? What the hell is going on because this has you all over it and no one else is willing to own up.”

“Okay fine yes, that was me.” Tony conceded. “I needed to see what public opinion was going to be and so far it is really good, Pep.”

“This is not how these things should be done! Tossing out bait with no schedule will just annoy people in the long run!”

“Look, that was never the plan. We always have a very large display at CES, I’m going to have fully functional working demos there with plans for second quarter release.”

“Well the Board is going to need something before that…”

Loki leaned in the doorway and held up the mockup, the battery that was hanging out of it cradled his palm. “Best I can do until we get a battery drawn up that works with the shape of the phone, unfortunately. I have some plans for that, but we really can’t make one here.”

Everyone stared at him, and Bruce wordlessly handed Tony a twenty dollar bill.

“Okay, shit, I’m impressed.” Tony said as he shoved the money in his back pocket.

“It’s barely a mockup.” Loki admitted, stepping fully into the room and handing it to Pepper. “Between the battery issue and the software…”

Pepper took it, ignoring the loose battery for the time being and flipping it back and forth in her hands. The screen was currently darkened, leaving it a tinted piece of glass with a metal edge, and a
few spare buttons with the usual signs carved into them. The front also had a globe symbol etched onto a button on the wide bottom edge and she pushed it, the screen lighting up and going clear even as the ‘locked’ symbol popped up. She swiped it unlocked and held it up, looking through it curiously and at the menu options floating suspended on the display. “For a thrown together prototype, I can see where you’re going with it.” She finally said.

“The final version will have a light sensor and will vary the amount of power put to light up the screen. Since the tint is electrically controlled the phone will also tint its display slightly in bright light.” Loki scratched the back of his neck, working it out as he talked about it. “Theoretically this would be one of the few phone screens you can see clearly in bright sunlight.”

“Sounds like a future advertisement to me.” Pepper turned again in her hands thoughtfully then passed it to Tony to look at. “What if the glass breaks?”

“It’s the same material I use for the combat safety glasses.” He replied. “It’s extremely scratch and strike resistant. The rest will give out before the screen does. It’s not the most delicate of touch response, but it’s functional and doesn’t feel sluggish, I suppose.”

“I’m still impressed you made this in such short order.” Tony really was, weighing it in his hand then giving it to Bruce to look at. “You think that’ll keep the wolves from our door, Pep?”

“For a little while.” She agreed, sighing. “I still don’t like that you put out all that stuff on the internet.”

He wove a hand. “I’ll leak another one announcing the official debut will be CES.”

“Tony. Tony, no.”

Days blended together a bit after that. Designing the laptops was much more satisfying as Loki wasn’t dealing with the kind of space restrictions as the phones. He found an unlikely lab buddy in Phil, who agreeably stopped by with his older laptop and discussed what he liked, what he would like to see in future models, and what absolutely needed to go.

And so it was two weeks later when the first beta model was put in Phil’s hands, matte dark grey finished metal with the SHIELD eagle etched into the top and model number B-001 on one corner of
the underside. He weighed it, opened it, and said with grave ceremony he’d go out of his way to break it.

Two hours later he cheerfully gave it back to Loki with the screen snapped away from the base.

Two hours after that, Loki gave it back with the design changed so the screen naturally disconnected to a touch tablet, with the model number changed to B-001B.

“You know when you gave me this job this is not exactly what I was expecting to be doing with my mortal life.” Loki remarked to Tony, dropping the second and third beta laptops on Tony’s desk. “No changes except the case shape.”

“Why are they hot pink?” Bruce asked slowly, looking up from what he was doing.

Loki looked back. “So they won’t disappear from the rumpus room.”

“With the amount of purple that Clint wears? Psh, right.” Tony snorted, opening the two machines side by side and sitting back thoughtfully. “There’s no reason why we couldn’t have a few case designs if they all pass testing.”

“This from a man with red and gold bedsheets.” Loki snorted.

“I can’t help that your blue skin looks good against them. I don’t know about the built-in handle, it feels like we’re aping on ToughBook.” Tony pointed at the laptop on the right.

“It’s that or texture the outside for easier carrying.” Loki pointed at the one on the left.

He picked it back up and blinked. “That’s an odd feel.”

“The metal has a crosshatched pattern on the edges that is brought further into relief by a rubberized paint. Phil says it feels like hand Velcro.”

“Let’s not call it that in official press releases.” He put it back down, sitting back and looking at Loki.
“Yeah, I know it’s not what you figured on doing, and trust me I plan to put your brilliance to use very, very soon because you’re the one who’s had intimate experience with the bifrost. Once we dig into that, you’ll probably become project lead.”

“You’re the one who actually has a clue about where that’s going.” Loki replied, then paused. “Where is that going, anyway?”

“Our first conference call is this Friday afternoon, I’ll lay out my entire fit of insane genius then.”

This is when Phil poked his head in and wordlessly held up the tablet side of his laptop, which was showing the brilliant red ‘I’m not working’ screen of STARK OS.

“You turn to troubleshoot.” Loki said cheerfully, standing and patting Phil’s shoulder on the way by. “Give him hell, Agent.”

“What the hell are you doing to these things?” Tony moaned, taking the two halves of the laptop.

Loki laughed his way back to his office.

Friday afternoon saw the trio gathering around Tony’s work table, all the screens up and an extra chair pulled in for Pepper. She was still in business clothes, hands wrapped around a mug of green tea and largely there because whatever Tony was planning was of course a rather large concern for her and the company, and this was easier than hearing it all over again later even if she didn’t say much for this meeting.

The time he’d emailed Reed Richards and Bruce Wayne about rolled around and Tony nodded to Jarvis, who sent video chat requests to the parties involved. Reed Richards popped up immediately, the feed showing his wireframe table up and the camera focusing on him sitting on the edge of it.

“Reed! Long time no see!” Tony grinned. “You like your early Christmas present?”

“Hey, Stark, you know I live a few blocks over right?” Reed retorted then wove a hand at his table. “And this is a hell of a thing. Got my attention anyway, though it has a little bit of a learning curve.”
“You’re a smart guy, you’ll figure it out.”

“Interesting conference call you’re setting up. Hello, Miss Potts, it’s good to see you again.”

“Doctor Richards, it’s always a pleasure.” She smiled.

“My lab partners here are Doctor Bruce Banner, and Loki Laufeyson of Asgard.” Tony said, nodding to one side than the other.

Reed quirked a brow. “You’re changing the level of your game.”

“You have no idea. Wait for our last player to arrive… And there he is. Afternoon, Wayne.”

“Forgive me for eating during this.” Bruce Wayne said apologetically, eating with chopsticks out of a takeout container. “I missed lunch. Good afternoon from Gotham, Michigan. Good to see you all.”

“Great to see you again. Given we have two Bruces in play, last names okay?” Tony wanted to know.

“I’m fine with that.” Bruce said easily. “A pleasure, Mr. Wayne, your lab equipment is some of the best we have on hand here.”

Once the introductions went around again, Tony stood up, setting his mug down and clapping his hands together. “So, shall we get to the reason why I asked for this little meeting to convene?”

“I admit I am curious why you saw fit to send me a rather unique piece of lab equipment.” Wayne said, Reed nodding.

“Well, to explain I’m going to load up a video and some renders. Get us on the same page.” Tony stepped to one of his touch screens, pulling up the data he’d already set up.
Getting footage of the bifrost wasn’t easy, but he’d had a lot of cameras going when they’d been picked up off the roof going to Asgard, and further going on his backpack, and the patchwork footage of Asgardian space travel made Wayne’s chopsticks pause halfway to his mouth and Reed slowly shift so he wasn’t sitting on his table anymore, leaning in and watching the video playing on his screen. That done, Tony played it again, but this time he pulled up the render of the bifrost and ran it alongside the video.

“What is that?” Wayne wanted to know, pointing his chopsticks at his screens.

“Seconded. Looks like some kind of tunneling effect, similar to a theoretical wormhole as handled by science fiction, not reality.” Reed peered at the render.

“That, gentlemen, is called the BiFrost. It’s Asgardian interstellar space travel. Hyper lightspeed travel, a literal ‘Beam Me Up Scotty’ from across the galaxy. We took a ride on it, not long ago.” Tony said, making sure his voice was even though he was grinning ear to ear. “And I’m going to build one in Detroit.”

There was a silence, Reed and Wayne staring at the renders then back at the camera feed.

“You’ve completely lost your mind.” Wayne said.

“Very potentially. You in?”

“I’m in. Reed?”

“Yeah, I’m in.” Reed shook his head. “I have no idea how you plan on pulling this off, Stark, but I’m in. You’ve hooked us, now bottom line it.”

Tony did, quickly and efficiently going through a two-prong plan he was hoping to get off the ground in the next year. The first, and what he’d just thrown out as bait, was the BiFrost. He and Banner had been working with the data they’d pulled from Asgard and had the start of blueprints for a BiFrost for Midgard, enough for him to start making estimations of staff required, and the layout of the facility as well as power demand. He showed them the rough out of the installation he had planned and pulled up a map of Detroit, highlighting what property he hoped to secure and wrecking ball, as well as entire empty city blocks he hoped to purchase and renovate to use as housing for staff as the facility went up.
He made his argument as to why he’d chosen Detroit. It was a city with a legacy of industrial work, so the infrastructure was there to support more of it. The nearby Great Lakes would allow for heavy barges to move in and out, the international airport was a must, and there were huge industrial parks just waiting for something else to come in and take over, not to mention massive populations of disenfranchised auto workers that Tony could easily hire and retrain. The city itself was across the lake from Canada, and a short plane ride from Chicago, Gotham, Metropolis, and the entire eastern seaboard.

And frankly, if the bifrost somehow blew up and took out the surrounding area, the damage would be minimal compared to other large cities.

“Cold but true.” Wayne admitted, having long set his forgotten lunch aside. “Michigan’s economy is miserable, and Gotham’s done better than our sister Detroit. Having this sort of thing could be a huge push for the state. It will be a singular facility and massively high tech. How many jobs do you think?”

“Well, I want to put four arc reactors in to support it.” Tony said. “Full sized arc reactors, you’re looking at, oh, four hundred personnel each for single units but since there will be crossover with staff, probably fourteen hundred jobs just from the power plants alone. The Bifrost facility itself? I don’t know yet. Nothing solid, anyway, but if we take in the fact that this will be a research facility? Probably a thousand jobs.”

“You’ve been extremely quiet, Doctor Richards.” Banner remarked, looking at him on the feed.

“I’m waiting for the other boot to drop.” Reed admitted. “Because Tony said this is only half the plan and this is huge.”

“Ah. Right. Well, the trouble with the BiFrost is it only gets us to places that already have one.” Tony explained. “At least initially. Asgard has had these for more years than we will ever understand, and can dump their people anywhere they want on Earth and pick them up at will. But realistically, by starting our own we’re opening communication with Asgard and the rest of their interstellar highway. Once we get going, we can move mass amounts of material, to, say… Mars, which will make things much more straightforward for NASA.”

“It’s planet to planet communication.” Wayne blinked.

“Correct. Nothing for the in between. So if we, as a planet, want to explore deep space, we still need space ships, and we need them sooner than later. So the second half the plan is to start a space program in earnest, multiple companies working together to build and exploration fleet.” Tony was
waving his hands and not really realizing it. “Go full Star Trek on this thing.”

“And now I understand why you want me in on this.” Reed said, grinning.

“I want you in on this, both of you, because you’re both intellectual and financial forces. Not only that, you both have connections that I may not have.” Tony said dryly. “I haven’t gone to my board yet with this, in fact this is the first time Pepper’s heard this in detail. This isn’t going to be cheap.”

“Agreed.” Wayne said. “This is going to be a lot of money. But, if we can spread out the financial burden, keep it transparent where every cent goes, we might be able to get a lot of corporations as well as government financing. Especially if we go multinational, like CERN is.”

“That is the plan.” He nodded. “I know we’re not as well located as CERN is, but it might still work. And frankly, even if our main pushes aren’t immediately financially viable, the side products should be. We’ll be innovating along the way.”

“This is huge, and insane, but I like it.” Reed decided. “I’m in, Tony. When you have a definite schedule of when you’ll be formally announcing this project and starting work on it, send it to me so I can participate. Barring superhero duties of course.”

“Well, yeah, same here.” Tony admitted.

“There’s one thing you haven’t yet told us.” Wayne said, leaning on his desk and looking seriously at the camera feed. “And that’s why. What’s your motivation here, Tony?”

“Legacy.” Tony admitted. “People like me, like us, don’t die of old age, and I’m walking around with a chest full of shrapnel and reactor. When the history books open in the future, I don’t want the main note about Stark Industries to be that we were war profiteers, weapon dealers. I want the main heading to say I led a space race. Yeah, that’s selfish, but I think sometimes selfish intentions can still lead to good things.”

Wayne stared at him for a long time then nodded once. “I’m in. Invite us over once we start formal discussion, I want to be in on laying out the facility plans.”

“Sounds great. You too Reed?”
“Absolutely.” Reed nodded.

“It’ll probably be new year when that happens.” Tony warned. “I need to make sure some products debut well at CES so the company will let me go off and play with space.”

“Ahh, reality.” Loki snorted.

“You haven’t said much this whole time.” Wayne remarked, looking at Loki. “You’re Asgardian?”

“I’m Thor’s adopted brother.” Loki shrugged. “I was raised on Asgard, but I’m actually from Jotunheim. I’m a frost giant.”

“Forgive me but a giant compared to what?” Reed blinked.

Loki snickered and stood, towering over Tony. “I’m six foot two in your ludicrous standard system. And for the record, I’m a runt.” That said he smiled sweetly, flipping his skin to blue and letting his eyes bleed red. “This is what I look like without glamour.”

“Captain Kirk, eat your heart out.” He grinned. “Either way you’re an extraterrestrial, and can I assume you’re versed in the BiFrost?”

“I’m not a systems engineer, but yes, I’ve done a lot of reading over my years. I’ll share what knowledge I have as we work on this project.” Loki let his skin fade to pale, sitting back down. “This is a lot of work we’ll have to do, gentlemen. Please realize that you’re introducing a massive technological shift to your world. There are those, I am certain, who will not agree with it.”

“I’m sure.” Wayne said. “We’ll just have to make facility security top notch. Stark? Keep us informed. I have other meetings to deal with.”

“Of course, thank you for making time for this one.” Tony nodded, watching both Wayne and Reed sign off before sitting back down and melting. “Oh, lord, did that go well? Tell me that went well.”
“You’re absolutely insane.” Pepper said, staring at him. “It’s going to cost an untold amount, profit is questionable, and the Board will likely hate it. Let’s do it.”

He smiled at her, glad beyond words.

Chapter End Notes

widened the spacing on this chapter as a test.
Winter took New York as it always did, hard, cold and full of snow. New Yorkers, of course, just zipped up coats, shoved their hands into pockets or gloves and pressed on, shoveling snow, fighting over parking spots and carrying on like they always had.

The first serious storm came with the usual suspects, small time villains hoping to take advantage of the city’s temporary paralysis for their own means. New York’s various heroes responded, some with more ease than others. Spiderman was for all intents out of commission, brief appearances full of hunched posture and shaking cold. Tony did continual battle with ice and wind before eventually shutting off his outside gear down entirely in favor of using the one in his lab.

Loki, however, thrived. Wind chills of thirty below or worse didn’t so much as make him bat an eye, in fact it only greased the tracks of his powers, putting up magical shields around teammates to help keep the cold off while he took advantage of it. Coat thrown on over a tank top, blue skin and red eyes caught by so many cameras, would be villains found themselves blasted down in storms of ice and even more brutal cold.

“These assholes need to go into hibernation until it’s a slightly more sane temperature.” Clint complained, all but eagle spread in front of the fire, ice melting off his gear.

“This is nothing.” Natasha replied.

“I’ve spent enough time in Siberia and Alaska to be inclined to agree.” Phil shook snow off his overcoat.

“I’ve found it quite refreshing.” Loki smirked.

“Since we’re all here..” Steve was grumbling at the iced-over zippers of his uniform (dark blue and silver grey, now, the stars and bars apparently out of style). “What are we doing for the holidays?” Phil reached over and popped Steve’s zippers free easily, earning himself a sincere thanks.
“Oh, we do have some of those coming up don’t we? A winter solstice celebration?”

“Well, that’s around Christmas, but Thanksgiving is next weekend.”

Loki blinked, then again. “Christmas? Two millennia and this planet is still going on about a god I’ve never met while Thor and I languish out of style.”

Seeing Steve have a very, very wide range of emotions about this statement, Tony joined the conversation. “Alright, no inquisitions, goes against the whole grain of the holiday thing. Holidays weren’t in your catching-up reading Loki?”

“I seem to remember something about Thanksgiving. Original colonization of this continent, dinner with the natives before the invading colonists tried to wipe them out?”

“You’re just a ball of fuckin’ sunshine.” Clint said, turning around and letting the fire work on his back.

“Oh, always.”

“I think what the Captain’s trying to ask is, as this group all but shares living space, what are our plans?” Phil said, hanging up his coat as well as Clint’s.

“Well, I thought about throwing a party on New Years, or Christmas, but..” Tony scratched the back of his head. “Nah. I have a thing on Christmas Eve I’d like everyone here for but outside of that, holidays are for family and I’ll totally understand if you guys have other family you want to go visit.”

“First I’ve heard of that.” Pepper said, walking in. “You need to give me more warning on these things, Tony.”

“No, relax, it’s nothing big, I’m just inviting a bunch of friends over for dinner. Nothing fancy.”

“Who’s cooking?” Bruce wanted to know from the cocoon of blankets he was occupying on the couch. “Because I think Steve and I can handle the group for Thanksgiving but more mouths to feed…”

“I was going to pay some good caterers overtime. It’s Christmas Eve, not Christmas. But if you guys have recipes you want them to use or want to help them prep, hey, your call. I wasn’t planning on them doing turkey though, we get enough of that for Thanksgiving and Christmas itself.”

“My family always did Peking Duck on Christmas Eve.” Phil supplied.
Tony snapped his fingers and pointed at Phil. “Brilliant, any protests?”

“I think we’re skipping a key point here.” Natasha said. “What friends do we have to be invited to a holiday meal?”

“You would be amazed. Don’t worry, I’m writing the guest list, it’ll be fun.”

“Given your previous parties should we expect strippers?” Clint wanted to know. “Because I’m down.”

“I’m not. Strippers on Christmas Eve, really?” Steve asked.

“Oh come on, Christ hung out with hookers.”

“He has a point.” Bruce deadpanned. Steve rubbed his eyes and muttered, walking away to get the rest of the way out of uniform.

“What’s up, Pepper?” Loki had hung his coat up and noticed she was carrying a tablet.

“Progress on project Let’s Buy Detroit.”

“We’re not buying all of Detroit.” Tony tutted, working the espresso machine at the bar, lining up mugs.

“First up, Packard. Nope.” Pepper stepped up to the bar, leaning on it and putting her tablet in front of her. Loki stepped up behind her, hugging her and nuzzling into her hair happily.

“We can’t buy it? Why not? It’s been abandoned for longer than I’ve been alive.”

“Historical registry.” She saw Tony’s look and smiled. “Yeah, it’s an eyesore. It’s also a good distance away from the industrial parks we might be able to raze for workspace, and honestly getting the sheer amount of property this facility needs isn’t going to be as easy as we figured. The good news is, we’ve been on the phone continually with the Mayor of Detroit as well as the state legislature and they’re ready to bend over backwards and kiss our feet to get this place built.”

“All the eyesores and abandoned housing and firetraps and we still can’t get property.” Tony tutted.

“Don’t worry, I put together a whole team and they’re working on it. We might end up asking the city to rezone an area for us. Smash down a section of residential. If we hire local, they’ll all but roll out red carpet for us.”
“That’s the plan. Both skilled labor and unskilled labor. At this point I’m intending to walk into the Union of Auto Workers and tell them to get their shit ready for some work.” Tony was talking over the noise of the espresso machine, filling the first three mugs and lining them up. “Phil, Clint, Natasha, your drinks are up.”

“Your barista skills are noteworthy.” Phil said, gathering the three mugs and them doling them out to Clint and Tasha.

“Bruce? Cocoa?”

“Yes please.” Bruce’s voice was a mumble as he further turned himself into a blanket burrito.

“I want to have property secured by the end of first quarter next year. That’s also when I’m hoping to make formal announcements to the public about this.” Tony explained to Pepper. “It’s a big project and going to take a long time, and it’s going to be a lot of negotiating between companies but I figure we can start clearing land while we’re doing that.”

“That’s reasonable.” She made a few notes on the tablet, Loki’s jaw hooked over her shoulder to watch her work. “Do I get a guest list for this Christmas eve party? Are we doing gifts for these mysterious guests?”

“I already sent invitations, no RSVPs as of yet but fine, I’ll give you the list. JARVIS, go ahead and share that file with her tablet, will you?” He busied himself steaming milk for cocoa, bringing Bruce a mug then making himself and Steve both a mocha.

“Almost all of these are all superheroes.” She said after a beat, watching the names scroll. “The names I recognize anyway.”

“You’d know their callsigns. Some it’s hit or miss whether they’ll show up. I don’t know Spiderman’s identity in spite of repeatedly asking.” He huffed. There was a bit of structural steel under his geardown where Spidey liked to sit, he’d left the invitation there with balloons and JARVIS had told him Spiderman found it. “I figure everyone might appreciate just a casual wear gathering and some food.”

“Pretty sure Logan would agree with Clint about the strippers.”

“So would Johnny Storm, what’s your point?”

“Bruce Wayne’s on your list.” Loki observed.

“Dude doesn’t have a lot in the way of family and I figure he, Reed and I need to get on some solid
friendly terms before we dump vast amounts of money into various projects."

“He’ll fit right in.” Phil said, coming back over to look at the list with Pepper. “Assuming that the theme of this party is vigilante justice.”

Tony lifted his eyebrows. “Did I just get underhanded confirmation that Bruce Wayne is Batman?”

Phil set a finger to his lips. “We don’t operate in Gotham if we can help it.”

“And thank fucking god for that. Once I’ve worked there. Once. Give me Siberia.” Clint interjected. “That entire city is hardcore insane.”

“It has a bar I like.” Phil smiled a touch.

“That’s because the city perfectly fits your pitch black soul, sir.”

“Did we give these people the ability to bring a plus one?” Pepper wanted to know. “If so, this isn’t exactly a few friends over and peking duck takes time, it’s not something that your caterers can prepare more of on the fly if we get more plates to fill than expected.”

“Let’s just hope they RSVP then.”

“Going to a meeting? By yourself? Am I allowed to be shocked?”

“Hey, fuck you too.” Tony suggested, tying his tie. “I am capable of doing my job.”

“I’m mostly on Loki’s side.” Pepper said, critiquing Tony’s choice in suits and stepping in to straighten his tie and fix the dimple. “You know very well that you were so notorious for being late or a no-show that people were stunned if you actually attended any given meeting.”

“That’s because most meetings are boring and absolutely against productivity, especially when you happen to be the guy making the stuff.” Tony replied as if that made all the sense in the universe. “This is different though, and if I do the presentation and pitch the board will know just how serious I am about it.”

“Actually that’s a really good point.” Pepper said after a beat. “This is the presentation you’ve all been working on?”

“Yeah, all in plain English, nothing so technical they’ll be inclined to say no because they don’t want
to concede they don’t understand.” Tony smiled and let her fuss over his appearance.

“Well, sad to say I won’t be there, I have a few meetings to deal with, people hoping to work with SI for various reasons.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Nobody I can’t handle I assure you.” She pecked his lips. “Knock them dead.”

“Oh I will.”

“I guess we’re fending for ourselves today Bruce.” Loki said, leaning in the doorway of the lab carrying their usual order from the coffee shop up the block. As he wasn’t bothered by the chill and enjoyed the walk, he was tasked with fetching their pastries and fancy drinks, and no one in the coffee shop mentioned the whole ‘blue’ thing.

“Tony off doing battle with the board?” Bruce looked up with a smile.

“Seems that way.” He stepped over, setting the pastry box down then passing Bruce his tea.

“We might actually be able to focus then.”

He snorted. “Isn’t that a fact. Do not misunderstand me I love the man but he’s got the dynamics of a hyperintelligent firework.”

Bruce guffawed, grabbing his raspberry scone. “Truer words never spoken. The man can hold prisoners with his rants. What’s on your agenda?”

“I’m playing architect stroke groundskeeper, apparently. He wants our massive industrial facility to not look like one so he’s asked me to look at the space we’re trying to purchase and make as much of it greenspace as possible. No concrete deserts.”

“While housing four power plants, a bifrost, and a lab facility, plus parking for a couple thousand employees.”

“Well, just because all that’s going on doesn’t mean it can’t be pleasant to look at. I did warn him I’d need quite a bit of space to pull such things off.”

“Mind if I catch up on reading some papers while you do that?”
“Not in the least.” Loki took his own pastry and drink to his office and settled in, Jarvis already bringing up a slew of related information.

It was a challenge, really, and not really the kind of work he normally did but he had to appreciate that Tony wanted the installation to have some sense of aesthetics. Of course, not knowing what kind of space he was going to have to work with made it more difficult.

So Loki tossed together several layout suggestions. Various ideas for square and rectangle plots, one that meandered on a strange shaped plot, one that a circle on a square plot, the buildings spiraling inwards with the Bifrost centered. He kept the weather in mind, and made notes about walkways connecting buildings, either underground or glassed-in tunnels. He dismissed most landscaping plants in favor of fruit bearing trees and bushes.

He was playing with another idea that centralized the bifrost when Jarvis brought a notice up on his screen to get his attention. “Feel free to interrupt me when you need to, Jarvis.” He hummed, sipping his long-cool coffee and lifting an eyebrow when Jarvis responded by bringing up security feed of Pepper’s office. Well, he knew it was Pepper’s office but the lights were low, and the air was filled with floating lights that for a moment made him think of an observatory but then resolved into a floating diagram of the human brain once his eyes focused on it.

And under it, a stranger and Pepper, and Loki felt power crawl along his spine in response to their proximity. Oh, yes, Pepper was capable of handling herself and that was why he’d come to adore her so much but… “Who is that man?”

“Aldrich Killian.” Jarvis brought up a file and Loki glanced through it, rattling his fingers on his thigh.

“That nice French bistro that Pepper likes, do they take reservations?”

“Would you like me to make a reservation for two for lunch, sir?”

“Yes.” He stood, saving his work. “Yes I would. Thank you.”

Twenty minutes later, Loki was sitting in the reception area outside Pepper’s office, having changed into one of his suits and somewhat tamed his hair. Tony was still caught up with his board of directors but consistently approved of Loki taking Pepper out to do romantic things, so he wasn’t too worried about that.

Happy Hogan had offered to drive them and was sitting next to them, looking grouchy. “I don’t like this guy.”
“You didn’t like me either.”

“I still don’t.” Happy deadpanned, then just barely quirked a smile when Loki laughed. “I have security concerns.”

“If he got this far into the building your guys checked him out. Anything?”

“Not enough. People who build corporations are never clean.”

Loki was still reflecting on this thoughtfully when Pepper’s office door opened so he stood and shot his cuffs on reflex before clasping his hands behind his back, watching Pepper and Killian walk out, Killian seeming profoundly disappointed (good) before Pepper looked at Loki in surprise.

“I was hoping there was a gap in your schedule where I might take you to lunch.” Loki said easily before she could ask beyond quirking an eyebrow, and was rewarded with an easy, real smile.

“I’d love to, actually. Let me get my coat.” She turned back to Killian and offered her hand. “Aldrich.”

“Pepper. We’ll meet again, I’m sure.” He shook her hand and watched her walk away before turning to Loki, just barely tipping his head and walking over to him. “I don’t believe we’ve met. Aldrich Killian, Advanced Idea Mechanics.” He offered his hand.

Loki took it, shaking firmly. “Loki Laufeyson, I work in Stark Labs.”

“Oh really? How’s he treat you?”

“He gave me a chance when no one else did.”

Killian frowned. “Wish I could say the same. Twice, now, I’ve tried to interest the man in my work.”

Loki nodded once. “Make sure there isn’t a third.”

To his credit, he managed to look genuinely taken aback, but then his expression was taken over slowly by a grin that Loki saw in the mirror sometimes. “We shall see. Have a good day, Loki.” And with that, he walked to the elevator, whistling.

“Something off about that guy.” Happy muttered.
“Oh, you’re very right to not like him.” Loki replied. “We have enough monsters around here. Pepper, dear! Happy’s offered to drive us, do you mind if I buy him lunch as well?”

Thanksgiving came and went, in a flurry of SHIELD assignments and work projects, the highlight of which was Steve getting caught on camera telling a smalltime villain that if his misbehaving had made Steve burn the turkey, he was going to make sure that said troublemaker’s community service was spent working in a soup kitchen. Which of course led to Steve ending up on a morning show talking about holiday recipes and how he really hadn’t gotten to have traditional holiday meals growing up, so now that he had easy access to such things he’d learned how to cook them.

The building Christmas tree remained popular but a small one was added to the rumpus room upstairs as well, and it was ringed with a growing number of boxes with a grand assortment of names on them. The décor changed as well, some furniture getting temporarily stored in exchange for dining tables and chairs. There was a professional kitchen on one of the lower floors of the building and the caterers would be working out of there, bringing up food when it was time for dinner.

“I mean I used to throw all these bombastic parties, but that’s because I didn’t really have any family.” Tony said, grunting as he and Loki lifted a high-polish sheet of steel up and leaned it on the wall of the rumpus room.

“So now that you have a family of sorts, you want to celebrate with them instead.” Loki said, pondering the metal once it was properly arranged. It had ‘Guest Book’ etched in fancy lettering at the top. “How exactly are people going to sign this?”

“A grand variety of ways.”

“You know, I’d say time moves faster now but I think it’s just that there’s so much more filling the day.” Steve said, coming into the room and regarding the décor. “Christmas Eve already. I looked at your guest list Tony, and I’m actually happy you did this, I’ve read a lot of them through SHIELD and I’ve been intending to meet most of them.”

“We’ll see how it works. It’s kind of an interesting assortment of eccentrics.” He admitted.

“Well, it should go great then, we already fit that description.” Loki smiled, and looked up as he felt the air sizzle. “Thor’s coming.”

“I was wondering if he was coming.” Steve smiled.

“The man keeps his own schedule.” Tony muttered, then looked up with a grin when the door to the balcony opened and Thor swaggered in, a keg on one shoulder and a grin on his face. “Hey big guy. We’re weapons free and casual wear tonight, alright?”
“Of course! Have we a rack for weapons?” Thor set the keg on the bar then laughed when he saw there was indeed a rack by the elevator, next to a coat rack. “I shall change, and return presently.” He hung up Mjolnir and took the elevator cheerfully.

“Is that safe?” Steve wanted to know.

“Why not, you’re the only other person we know of so far that can pick it up.” Tony pointed out.

“I shall be providing security as needed, sir.” Jarvis’ voice provided, his avatar popping into being standing next to Tony. “As always.”

“This is going to be quite interesting.” Loki was amused by the whole thing. “When are we expecting guests?”

“Well, the invitation said dinner at six, but asked that people arrive a bit early.” Tony said. “I figure that gives us time to eat our fill, drink, and get home before it’s officially Christmas.”

“A car’s pulled into the garage, sir.” Jarvis said, avatar pixelating into nothing. “I shall show them up.”

“It’s barely after four.” Clint said, stepping out of the elevator in jeans and a muscle shirt, Natasha and Phil with him. Natasha was in jeans and a blouse, and Phil wearing a sweater over slacks.

“Well, some people live nearby and traffic always sucks around dinner.” Phil replied, and grinned when he saw the keg on the bar.

The first to arrive was a stately tall older man, streaks of grey at his temples, walking with a younger man who was dark haired, with sunglasses on and a white cane.

“Doctor Strange, it is an honor.” Tony said, bouncing over and offering a hand.

“Stephen is fine.” The man smiled and shook his hand. “I picked up Mr. Murdock along the way.”

“Very kind of him, I do a lot of things but driving isn’t among them.” Matt Murdock laughed and shook Tony’s hand. “Call me Matt, I’m not going by Daredevil tonight.”

“I thought this was a casual event?” Stephen had spotted Phil.

Phil put up his hands. “I live here, and I am off duty. My intentions for the evening is eat my fill and drink double my fill. Good to see you again, Doctor.”
Loki ended up sitting next to Bruce on one of the relocated sofas, both watching with identical expressions of bemusement as the guest list trickled in. The Fantastic Four were the next to arrive, strolling in as a group and greeting those they knew, introductions going around. Tony pulled Reed over to shake hands with Loki and Bruce, then promptly started a dense conversation that made Loki decide that he needed a drink if he was going to keep track of the evening.

He was still standing at the bar, debating with Phil about whether the keg should be left until after dinner when Jarvis reappeared. “Spiderman’s on approach, sir, and he has a plus one.”

“Maybe he brought that girl he seems so crazy about.” Tony replied. “It’s fine, he did RSVP plus one.”

“Wait, isn’t he masked?” Matt asked.

“So?”

“Masked hero, girlfriend…”

Tony gave Matt a blank look, which is when Phil said “Aw, no,” in a voice so full of resignation it got Clint's attention.

Spiderman had touched down on the balcony, wearing his mask with winter clothes and setting down another male figure, who was in a red and black bodysuit and for all appearances heavily armed. Spiderman didn’t pause, just skidding for the door and scrambling inside. “Cold as hell out there. Uh, hi everyone.”

“Hey kid.” Steve said, looking up with a smile then pausing as the second party swaggered in the door.

“Holy SHIT this is bitching! I knew Iron Man had a cool pad but aw, man. We are totally even, Spidey. Wait, PHIL? I thought you were dead!”

“Okay, have to admit, don’t know the new guy.” Tony said, watching said new guy energetically hug Phil, who was awkwardly patting the guy’s back with the same ginger care one might use to pat a rabid dog.

“His name is Wade Wilson.” Natasha seemed resigned. “Alias Deadpool.”

“This guy!” Deadpool said, dropping Phil and hooking both thumbs at himself. “Merc with a mouth,
slumming it with heroes tonight.”

“Yeah, okay, we’re casual wear and weapons free tonight. Gear down.” Tony replied, pointing at the weapons rack. Wade went, peered at Mjolnir, tried to pick it up and was brutally yanked to the floor so hard bones broke, by the sounds. “Holy fucking shit!”

“Dammit, what did I say about touching things?” Spiderman moaned, having shrugged out of his coat. He was just in a black sweater and jeans underneath, which was a bit odd combined with the partly rolled up mask.

“Is he okay?” Sue wanted to know, looking around Ben.

“I’m uncertain.” Thor picked up both Mjolnir and Wade, holding the latter at arm’s length and frowning.

“He’s a regenerator.” Phil said. “Second strongest in the world only next to Logan as far as we know. Let him leave the costume on, just… trust me on this one.”

“Straighten out my back, will you big guy?” Thor gave Wade a shake, bones popped and he gave another thumbs up. “Nice hammer. So’s the weapon.”

Spiderman buried his face in his hands but Thor laughed richly and pounded Wade’s back, and the party continued on.

Bruce Wayne was the next to arrive, bringing +2, which he’d called about upon getting the invitation. That plus two was a handsome if slightly nebbish man named Clark Kent, apparently a reporter for the Daily Planet in Metropolis, and a Princess Diana.

“Wonder Woman. Well, you are keeping interesting company Wayne.” Tony bowed and kissed the back of her hand. “I would have invited you directly, but I didn’t have your information.”


“I know that you know so cut the crap.” Wayne grumbled at Tony, accepting a glass of wine from Pepper. “A pleasure to see you again, Miss Potts.”

“Thank you for bringing Diana along, women are sorely outnumbered right now.”

“Quality over quantity.” Diana smirked, and Pepper smiled back.
The last to arrive were those from the Xavier Academy, having driven down from upstate and fought traffic and snowy roads to get to the Tower, but Tony had anticipated and said in the invitation that he’d open up the rest of the guest rooms, just asking that Xavier call to let him know how many were coming. Xavier himself arrived, bringing with him Logan, Jean, Storm, Scott, and Rogue.

“Well this is quite a crowd.” Loki observed, watching the mad storm of introductions and the groups drift. The intellectuals coalesced into a group almost immediately, gathering Tony, Reed, Charles, Sue, Stephen, and both Bruces as well as Spiderman, who looked like he was mostly following along. Another group had gathered up around the television, trading controllers back and forth. The controllers were currently in the hands of Clint, Johnny, Diana, and Deadpool, and the catty shit talk was clearly as much a game as the one on the screen.

Tony had finally explained the metal guestbook, and provided a handful of multicolored paint markers for signing in. Logan had etched his with a claw, Scott with his eyes, others jotted their callsigns or wrote flowery signatures. Tony was going to frame it on the wall, apparently, in hopes of making such parties regular things.

Keeping track, Loki had realized. Of who was still alive, still a friend.

“It’s no more boisterous than dinner at home can be.” Thor replied, flopping on the couch next to Loki and offering a beer. “We must someday introduce Sif to Diana.”

“They will either join forces to destroy us all or claw out each other’s eyes.”

“Mind if I join you?” Matt asked, sitting down across from them.

“Not at all, friend.” Thor replied warmly.

“This the social reject gathering?” Logan asked, also claiming a seat by the fire. “Never was a fan of those games and the other conversation’s making my head hurt. What’s in the keg?”

“Asgardian mead! We shall open it after dinner. Phil’s claimed the first glass, I’m afraid.”

“Phil will have to fight me for it.”

“You know I’ll do that right?” Phil wanted to know, leaning on the back of one of the couches with one eyebrow quirked. “I know all your weak points.”

“Yeah yeah, thought I got rid of you for a while there, asshole.”
“You know how it is. Nick finds death a very poor excuse for calling off of work.”

Dinner rolled around and Tony let it temporarily become chaos because he stated cheerfully, after shouting for attention, that there was no assigned seating for the dinner table and that it was a free for all. This led to a scramble as people went for seats and moved each other around, and Tony was very satisfied to see that people were actually mingling.

Tony ended up between Loki and Pepper, which was normal. He ended up across from Clark Kent, who had been invited so they had positive press on this after the holidays. Kent was bracketed in by Charles and Wade, who had tried to sit by Phil had been picked up and moved one seat so Logan could sit by Phil instead. Clint had ended up next to Matt and they were in some deep conversation, which Tony thought was interesting, the guy with nearly superhuman vision and the guy with no vision at all.

Dummy and You were on the elevator with the first round of kitchen staff, You setting another wrapped gift by the tree then they both idled over to the windows to watch the snow blow. While they were certainly noticed no one asked, apparently already accepting that robots were a thing that seemed fitting in Stark Tower.

“I just have to say, Phil, this was a great suggestion. This is delicious.” Steve said in reference to the peking duck, passing a platter of neatly carved duck down the table.

“Christmas Eve is for new family traditions.” Phil replied, tossing Matt a roll and smiling when he caught it neatly. “Thanksgiving and Christmas, those already have a lot of trappings. Christmas Eve? It can be as individual as we want it.”

“Superheroes and duck, that’s pretty original.” Johnny said, shamelessly piling his plate high with roast vegetables and potatoes.

“You never did explain your motivations for this.” Stephen observed. At some point his cape had taken leave from the coatrack and was now richly draped over his casual clothes, though it really seemed more like its idea than his.

“Do I need motivations for everything?” Tony wanted to know, then went still when Charles just looked at him. “Look, guys, we have a hard life. I know we don’t always see eye to eye but we need to at least try to get along and it’s rare any of us meet outside of work.”

“So, the presents. Are those for us?” Wade wanted to know.

“JARVIS, did we get him dealt with?”
“I did indeed.” Jarvis said on the overhead.

“Yeah, I made plans, everyone’s getting one Christmas Eve present. Don’t expect anything fancy but I didn’t give you all ties either.”

“He’s put a lot of effort into this considering he’s also trying to build a portal into space.” Pepper said dryly.

“Back up a tick, what?” Ben said, perking up. “Reed said you had something that was going to interest us very soon but said he couldn’t disclose details until paperwork was signed.”

“I really didn’t want to talk business tonight. You’ll hear about it soon enough. Let’s just say I’ve been busy. New topic?”

They cracked the keg after dinner and after three rounds of rock paper scissors, Phil still got the first mug out of the keg. Logan, to his credit, only laughed and took the second frosted mug from Thor’s hands.
There were assorted trays of desserts set up for everyone to help themselves to, and at this point it was put out that people could leave as they wanted to. Once everyone had a drink and their choice in dessert (Pepper noting that the cannoli and Chinese donuts were absolutely destroyed first and foremost), Tony took Dummy and You to the Christmas tree and enlisted them to help him hand out presents, which they actually seemed pretty happy about.

Tony had gone through SHIELD files trying to figure out appropriate gifts for everyone that seemed somewhat personal and weren’t so expensive that anyone would focus on the cost. Spiderman and Deadpool both had new bodysuits, made out of one of the thermal armor weaves he’d been working on. The weight of the cloth made the outfits look less painted on as well, as Wade demonstrated by changing immediately (Spiderman all but threw him in the bathroom because Wade was entirely willing to strip naked on the spot). Logan got a set of gloves with opening ports where his claws sprang through. Clark Kent got a small mobile workstation which when turned on brought up a holographic screen and keyboard, he started using it immediately to write up thoughts on the gathering. Bruce and Reed of course had gotten their gifts early but happily accepted bottles of good booze, and on down the list it went.

“You put a lot of thought into this.” Steve said, watching everyone comparing gifts.

“It was an interesting puzzle to solve.” Tony said. “Besides that’s the tradition right? One present on Christmas Eve?”

“You didn’t have to do this for any of us though.” Bruce pointed out, already wearing his gift. It was an odd thing in his mind and it’d taken him a few minutes to sort it out. It was a heavy fleece scarf with a hood, so when he draped it centered across the back of his neck he could pull the hood up. Which was when he realized the device was loaded with technology because the din around him
quieted. The ends of the scarf had pockets and he found controls and a plug-in for an MP3 player.

“Spent a lot of my life spending money on frivolous things, man. I just hope I made good choices.”

“I’m not disagreeing with your thought process.” Loki said, calling attention to Diana shrugging on a long leather coat in her colors and striking a pose.

“Amen.” Steve said with reverence and got himself elbowed and poked by multiple people for his trouble.

Loki just smiled and drifted, looking at Clark, who was perched on a barstool at the edge of it all, his gift balanced on one leg and typing in midair. So he got himself a fresh drink and carried a barstool over, setting it down next to Clark and sitting down, looking at him curiously. “Surely this is one of the few nights where most Midgardians don’t work.”

“Well, I’m not writing the article.” Clark admitted. “Just getting some thoughts down so I can write more coherently in a few days. This is a lot to keep track of.”

Loki hummed. “Isn’t it though. You’re sure to get questions, a reporter with a free pass into all of this.”

“I’ve known Wayne for a while now. He called me, and I couldn’t turn the opportunity down.” He looked at Loki curiously. “You don’t quite fit in yourself.”

“I can hardly be called out for not fitting in at a gathering of misfits.” He lifted an eyebrow in a high arch. That made Clark snort, but he kept looking at Loki, slouching his glasses to look at him over the tops of them. Loki’s skin prickled and he put his hands up, skin flaring blue and a flash of frost drifting between them. “Just because I am different does not give you permission to look.” He bit this out in a hiss.

Clark blinked and pushed his glasses back up.

“Yes, I just made you, but I did when you arrived. Everyone here is their own sort of avenger. This is a hero party, or haven’t you noticed, Mr. Kent?” Loki had the courtesy to keep his voice low. “Besides, whatever your vision does, I somehow doubt it can see the illness of my mind.”

“Do you mind if we talk about that instead?” He asked after a beat. “I realize that’s very private, but mental illness in heroes is nearly never discussed.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’d make a good holiday article topic. Stick to exiled prince.” Loki advised. “That said, you have an interesting point. I’ll speak to Tony, perhaps it would do well for many if he and I both discussed it with you.”
“Discuss what?” Tony said, joining them and giving Loki a concerned look. “You went blue, you okay?”

“Merely discussing special talents.” He flicked a hand dismissively. “Tony, there is a veteran soldier suicide problem in his country right now, due to lack of support for those with broken minds. It so happens we both have broken minds. Perhaps, some public media coverage about our particular issues would shine a brighter light on this particular soldier’s plight?”

That brought Tony up short. “Uh, wow heavy stuff. Sure, good idea actually, let me know Mr. Kent.”

“I get the distinct idea I’m going to owe you a favor or three, Stark.” He smiled and gestured at his floating screen.

“Nah, man. It’s Christmas.”

Eventually the party broke up, and Tony’s guest rooms filled up. Charles Xavier’s people stayed over, deciding to make the drive in daylight. Some lingered in the rumpus room, eating the rest of the desserts and playing video games on into the night.

Tony was kind of glad to get away from the crowd, stretching as he walked into the apartment with Pepper and Loki. “So, that went well.”

“So, Wayne is Batman. Who is Kent?” Loki wanted to know.

Pepper blinked, then again. “I have no idea. I thought he was a reporter?”

“He’s definitely got abilities.” Loki replied.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if Wayne invited a superpowered reporter friend.” Tony said, getting a box out of his workstation and looking at them both before starting to talk in a rush. “Look, I managed to get presents for a bunch of near-strangers but I couldn’t figure out what to get either of you, I mean I thought about necklaces but that’d be weird probably and I know none of us can really wear rings for work so I kind of split the difference.” He walked over and opened the box, showing three rings and three chains of varying length. All the rings had three small stones, ruby, diamond and emerald, in flush settings, but the bands were different materials, tungsten, platinum, and gold.

“Tony.” Pepper blurted, staring. “Are you…”
“It’s uh. Not exactly a marry-me? It’s commitment. Sorta marriage. I can’t legally marry you both and I don’t want to marry just one. Look, I’m not very good at this.” Tony trailed into muttering.

“You beautiful impossible man.” Loki laughed and pulled him in by his shirt, kissing him. “No, you aren’t, but whatever you are trying to suggest, I agree to.”

“Jerk.” Tony muttered this against Loki’s lips, then shifted to kiss Pepper when she stepped into the embrace to make it three way. Afterwards he passed out the bands and necklace chains, keeping the tungsten for himself then giving the gold to Pepper, and the platinum to Loki.

“The chains are thoughtful. Wearing metal around our fingers in battle or in the shop would be dangerous to our hands.” Loki hummed, looping the ring on his chain and putting it on.

“It’s not enough.” Tony fretted, putting his own on.

“Au contraire. I think it’s just enough.” Pepper said, kissing Tony then grabbing them both by the chains and taking them to bed, grinning.
I'm just going to admit I have no excuse for this updating so slowly, though I admit part of it has to do with logistics.

I am now three movies behind coming up on four and this series has become unmoored from MCU canon. I've started trying to get ready to deal with Iron Man 3, but with no Malibu mansion and Tony not quite as much of a hot mess, the lead up will be different at the very least. Thor 2 I've pretty much figured out how to compensate for, as well as Winter Soldier/Agents of SHIELD.

All this on top of the plot of this story. Admittedly it might be for the best, as the story is sort of around a massive construction project at this point.

Loki woke up first, sitting up in bed and contemplating his partners, arms resting on his lifted knees. Tony was sprawled on his back, because sleeping on his chest was sometimes very uncomfortable with his reactor, head turned to nose into Pepper’s hair. She was sprawled on her side between them, head resting on one of Tony’s arms. Tony had had that arm laced under them both, because he always wanted to keep in contact with both of them in bed.

Even sitting there smiling fondly, he could pick out the flecks of grey in Tony’s beard and at his temples.

Why did Midgardians have to live such short lives, such candle flickers in the hurricane winds of the cosmos?

What was he getting into, agreeing to a partner bond with two of them?

He slipped out of bed, putting on a pair of sleep pants and padding into the living room, staring out the windows. It was barely dawn on Christmas morning but that didn’t stop New York, much anyway, snow mitigation crews were working ceaselessly to clear the roads.

“Good morning, Sir, and Happy Yule.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you, Jarvis!” Loki said, delighted, as he moved to start the coffee machine. “Is anyone else up yet?”
“Those that do sleep are still asleep, sir.”

Interesting answer, but Loki decided he’d allow it. “Could you bring up a work station display for me?”

“Certainly. What file should I save it into?”

He paused. “Somewhere Tony won’t find it.”

“Starting a secret project, sir?”

“I’m going to write a spell, Jarvis, I don’t need him hurting himself trying to figure it out. It’s not for Midgardians to understand.”

Five minutes later he’d situated himself in an easy chair, a mug of coffee in his off hand, sprawling and contemplating an empty digital drawing desk. He shut his eyes and lulled his head back, ruffling through the tatters of the knowledge he used to have.

It’d taken time to get used to. He still was, really. The years, the literal hundreds of years he’d spent in intense study because magic didn’t come innately to most male Asgardians, even with Frigga’s guiding hand he’d had to come about it at his own angles, all of it swept away by what Odin had done to punish him. But in response, his own quelled nature had risen up, his heritage and innate abilities muddying the waters even further.

He really hadn’t written a spell since all of that had happened, but he had power, and he knew the mechanics.

Of course, this wasn’t something he’d ever done.

There were options to stop Midgardians from aging. Idun’s Apples being one of them, but immortality and Midgardians was always a potential powder keg. Their brains simply weren’t designed for that, Midgardians lived as fast as Asgardians lived slow and tended to feel the weight of the years far more readily.
Sadly that was the easy option. Idun owned him from some years ago and she’d probably cop up apples if he asked. But he didn’t want to stop his new family, his friends from aging. Yet, anyway.

He just wanted to rewind the clock a little bit. Give them back years all but stolen or wasted.

And that was a far more difficult task to undertake. Time could be bent but the cost was always high.

He drew with one fingertip on his dominant hand, laying out the basics in broad strokes then zooming in to refine it. He was surprised when Jarvis started highlighting part of the spell with electrical symbols, indicating potential error.

“While I do not understand it, sir, the syntax is very similar.” Was all Jarvis could say about it.

“And that’s why I need to keep it away from Tony.” Loki muttered into his mug, tending to one of the highlighted portions and typing in the air one handed, making notes about cost. “Entropy is such an inevitable bitch.”

“Good morning to you too.” Pepper said, untangling her necklace from her hair as she walked over. “What are you working on?”

“A bit of a personal project. Save it and close it, Jarvis, please.” He moved the screen to the side so she didn’t have to step through it, reaching up to catch her as she leaned into him. “Merry Christmas.”

She hummed and kissed him. “Come back to bed.”

“You are very persuasive when you want to be.” He’s fond, standing as she pulled at him and letting himself be dragged back to the bedroom.

Tony was sitting awake on the bed and made grabby hands at them both. “Come here and fuck my brains out for Christmas.”
That made Loki laugh. “This is why I find it hilarious when the news says you’re charming.”

“I am charming. Somehow I got both of you didn’t I?” He grabbed Loki and tried to pull him onto the bed, Pepper was taking a detour to the closet. “Oh is that how we’re playing today?”

“I feel as if I missed something.” Loki got back out of his sleep pants, shoving Tony back on the bed before crawling up after him.

“I can’t believe we haven’t broken them out before this.”

Loki was about to ask ‘broke what out?’ when Pepper came back carrying a simultaneously curious and totally recognizable shape, cheerfully bouncing over to the bed. “Ah. You know I think those have existed as long as humans have? It’s something Asgardians actually took back to Asgard, perplexingly.”

“Wait, Asgard didn’t have sex toys?” Tony was entirely skeptical.

“No, we did, just not…” He made a vague gesture.

“Well, I assure you there are some delightful little updates.” Pepper grinned and poked Loki’s side with it before switching it on.

Loki about leapt out of his skin then took it from her with a laugh. “Oh my.” The vibration of the device traveled easily through his skin and he quickly found the controls, going through the settings and just deeply amused at the innovation of humanity. The heft of the toy did rather rudely hint at Tony’s preferences in such things as well. The shape was curious to him, there was the shape of an erect dick but then it swooped and tipped up into a bulb shape.

“What, you thought I was going without getting my brains boned out when I was just with Pepper?” Tony asked, having already grabbed the lube. “I love that we get to teach the silver tongue something.”

“If you ever get bored of uplifting the human race you could come sell sex toys to Asgard.”
“I know a woman who’d happily do that, remind me after the holidays.”

“Of course he knows a woman.” Pepper rolled her eyes, taking the toy back and shutting it off.

“I’d be stunned if he didn’t.” Loki agreed. “So, Tony between us?”

There was a pause, during which Pepper idly tossed the toy up and down in one hand while exchanging a series of eyebrow quirks with Tony. “Change of plans.” Tony said, grabbing Loki and rolling, putting Loki over him. “You in the middle.”

“I like this plan.” Pepper said, grabbing a set of disposable gloves.

“I’m not so certain.” Loki admitted but let himself be manhandled (or more moved how they wanted him to, he’s tall enough and heavy enough that even working together they have a hard time manhandling him but he’s still charmed they try). Tony ended up sitting against the headboard with Loki sprawled against him, kissing him. After a few long moments Loki relaxed. He’d woke up in his Jotun skin but his skin paled where they were touching him, Tony’s fingers on his back inevitably finding the raised tribals and following them.

“You never have told us what these mean.” Tony remarked against his lips.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Supposedly the marks on my forehead are a ‘crown’ which is a royal lineage marker but that’s Asgardian lore and they don’t actually know much of the Jotun.”

“They’re beautiful no matter what they mean.” Pepper hummed, fingertips tracing the marks at the dip of Loki’s spine while slick fingers on her other hand rubbed between his cheeks.

Loki sighed and tucked his face into Tony’s neck, body all too willing to open up for her slick slender fingers. He supposes it’s a sign of his improving health that he’s not as desperate as he used to be during this, previously they had to all but gentle him down because his need was almost self-consuming. Now he groaned and arched as she pressed that good spot inside him, chuckling when Tony shifted and dug into his stomach.

“Lazy Christmas sex?” Tony asked, mouthing along one of Loki’s ears, tongue tracing along the shell.
“New experience, just trying to trust you both.”

“Oh, no, she’s good at this, she used to make me scream.”

“We were somewhat athletic last night.” Pepper hummed, watching Loki’s hips tip and roll with her fingers.

“We’ve done worse, remember the furniture we broke in Malibu?”

“Oh both of you just hush and fuck me.” Loki grumbled, then growled when they both laughed at him. He looked over his shoulder and arched an eyebrow, because the toy was now standing proudly away from Pepper’s body like the real thing would. “That’s an interesting sight.”

Pepper grinned at him and reached out, wrapping his hair around her hand and pulling. He hissed through his teeth, body jolting out of the semi-languor he’d been in. Tony chose that moment to bite the side of his neck hard and he jolted again, shivering and letting Tony support him as Pepper’s fingers slid free and the toy slid home.

Tony groaned and bit his lower lip as Loki’s fingernails dug into his chest, watching Loki’s eyes and smirking when the ruby-red of his eyes almost started to burn. “Your red eyes glow too.” He murmured, cupping Loki’s face.

He would have huffed, but Pepper did something with the toy’s controls and suddenly the buzz he’d felt earlier with his hands lanced through his core so he ended up swearing very creatively instead. He shifted, reaching up and grabbing the headboard above Tony’s head, shifting to his knees. Pepper caught on and shifted with him, hands on his hips lightly as he started to roll his hips back onto her, panting.

“Oh the wonders of modern technology.” Tony sat back, watching the show, stroking himself almost as an afterthought.

“I think we need to top him more often…” Pepper murmured, leaning and licking over one of Loki’s shoulders before biting. She’d been the one to suggest this to Tony only a few months into their relationship, because honestly she loves doing it.

Loki bit back a keen, shoving his hips back as hard as he could. “What will it take to shut you both
up?” The vibration is a jolt to his nerves, and his muscles twitch in frustration, arching more, trying to get more of it.

She gave his hair another yank, making him let go of the headboard and straighten up. She ground against him, licking his ear. “I think you should suck Tony off.”

“Yes. Definitely.” Tony agreed, dropping his hand.

Loki had a moment where he was considering the logistical issues, mainly that Tony was too close for him to lean down, but then Pepper shifted backwards and pulled him with. He moved with her, keeping pressed close, letting her push him down so he’s on his knees and elbows. Usually he’s more in charge in bed but he found himself appreciating this side of Pepper, especially when her hands landed on his shoulders and she came off her knees, bracing and pulling back only to thrust with all her bodyweight. He muffled his half-scream into his forearms, gasping, then grabbed for Tony. Tony shifted how Loki wanted then made one of those low hums in his chest when Loki swallowed him to the base.

After that everything blurred for Loki, aware of their hands on him, Pepper’s hands still pushing on his shoulders for balance, Tony stroking his face and neck as he babbled nonsense under his breath. It was certainly a twist on how they usually fit together and he found himself just fine with it.

Tony came first with a guttural moan of their names, then just helped brace Loki against the force of Pepper’s movements. Loki buried his face into Tony’s skin and quivered, feeling like he was stuck at an edge then the buzzing of the toy changed, harder and faster and the world washed to a spin out of white as he came, gasping.

He winced a bit when he felt the toy slip free, collapsing down to his side and tugging at Tony before he reached out a hand blindly for Pepper. She joined them a moment later, curling up along his back and kissing the side of his neck. It was several moments before he said anything, face tucked into Tony’s sweaty curls, and he chuckled first. “I like that side of you dear, show it more often.”

“I could be convinced.” Pepper smirked against his skin.

“We’re not becoming your harem boys.” Tony grumbled at her.

“You say that like you aren’t already.”
It was well over an hour later that the trio got through the shower. Tony was out first, walking out wearing only jeans and raiding the coffee pot still sitting on the heater. “Merry Christmas, Jarvis.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you sir.”

“What’s our headcount? Any guests still here?”

“Of the party guests, remaining are Wolverine, Doctor Strange, and Deadpool, sir.”

“Fair enough. Where’s everyone at?”

“Gathering slowly in the rumpus room, sir. Agent Coulson and Agent Barton are making cinnamon rolls.”

“For everyone?”

“That does appear to be the case sir.”

Tony abandoned his mug and returned to the bedroom. “Fresh cinnamon rolls upstairs!”

“Hungry are we?” Loki asked, wearing only a towel and brushing through his hair.

“Well, I’m going to go up and get one once they’re available, regardless of what you two do.” He scoffed, taking the brush from Loki and stepping behind him to brush his hair out.

“So I’ve been wondering. Was last night also a deliberate attempt at networking?” Pepper asked, coming out of the walk in closet with clothing for both her and Loki. She also threw Tony a long sleeved t-shirt.
“Sort of? Yeah I threw a party, but I also want these people on our side if something happens.” Tony admitted, draping the shirt over one shoulder and returning to Loki’s hair, gathering it carefully in his free hand so he wouldn’t pull. “And I think some surprising bridges were built last night.”

“If Steve and Princess Diana don’t become a thing I’ll be stunned.”

“Good lord, imagine their children.” Loki said, staring into the middle distance while he considered it.

“I’ve talked to Steve about that, and the genetics he’d pass on would be pre-serum.” Tony said, setting the brush aside and tying Loki’s hair back in a loose ponytail. “He’s concerned about it. Says he knows modern medicine is better but then he told me about what he went through as a child. Did you know the only treatment for anemia was eating raw liver?”

“Let it never be said that Midgardians aren’t made of stern stuff.”

“Your change in attitude since your initial arrival is sometimes stunning.” He kissed Loki’s shoulder and stepped away, pulling his shirt on.

“It’s a strange thing. I’ve still met plenty of Midgardians the world would be better off without. That includes the entire country club in Malibu, if you recall.”

“Yeah, that trip had it’s rough spots.”

“We’re all better off for riding those out, though.” Pepper supplied, pulling a sweater on. “I’m not dressing up today. I didn’t even bother putting on makeup.”

“Oh, bless everyone’s hearts they’ll have to deal with your naturally lovely face.” Loki faked shock.

“Oh stop.” She pulled him down for a kiss, though. “Get some clothes on.”

The rumpus room was warm, the fireplace going and delicious smells filling the air. Most of the
group had already gathered, though Bruce was apparently sleeping in. Doctor Strange was sitting in midair, staring out the window and sipping a mug. Logan was sitting by the fire with Thor, some kind of Asgardian board game between them, their focus on that, Steve and Natasha watching curiously.

“Merry Christmas, everyone.” Tony said as he walked in. “And what do I smell?”

“Cinnamon rolls in the oven and mulled apple cider in a crock pot.” Clint replied, who had apparently been talked into wearing sleeves.

“Miracle workers both of you. You have many hidden facets, Phil.”

“A waffle has many divots.” Phil agreed, already getting out three mugs and lining them up by the pot.

Loki snorted.

“I thought we had three guests still lingering? Not that I mind.” Tony’s more of a coffee guy but he accepted a mug of cider. “… Is there booze in this?”

Phil stared at him.

“Translate that out of Phil-ese into a yes or no, I can’t decide which is more obvious.”

“Yes, it’s spiked, and it’s fantastic.” Loki replied, having already sipped his. “Just enough to let you know it’s there. Lovely.”

“I do hope I’m not overstaying my welcome?” Strange asked, pivoting in midair to face toward the bar.

“Not at all! Just keep in mind I only got partygoers one gift each so nothing else is forthcoming.” Tony replied. “I’m not going to throw someone out the door on a holiday if they’ve decided they have nowhere better to be.”
“I wasn’t even expecting a gift last night.” Strange wove it off.

“If you were wondering about Wade, he crashed on a couch up here. When we came up, I decided to loan him some clothes and the use of my shower.” Phil told Tony. “So he’ll probably come up out of his bodysuit. Just warning you, all of his skin is covered in scars.”

“Ouch, rough. Like, healed third degree burns?” Tony said, wincing in sympathy.

“No, but it looks similar.”

“Very similar.” Steve agreed, walking over to join them and holding up his empty mug hopefully. Phil took it and worked on refilling it, stirring the huge crock pot with the ladle meditatively for a few moments first.

“Wait, he’s got a healing factor right? You said last night he’s second only to Logan.” Tony blinked.

Phil shook his head, passing the refilled mug to Steve. “Doesn’t work that way for Wade.”

“Logan was born with it.” Clint interjected, peeking at the cinnamon rolls and getting swatted lightly by Phil for his trouble.

“And what, for Wade its Maybelline?”

From the fireplace came a noise that sounded suspiciously like someone choking on their drink trying not to laugh. Tony looked toward the fireplace and was rewarded with a grin and a thumb’s up from Logan.

“Honestly the dude’s another government project victim.” Clint explained. “Cancer victim. He got mad healing from the experiment, but he still has cancer. His skin reflects the cancer.”

“That is fucked up.” Tony decided. “And not really Christmas material.”
“I was kind of wondering why this is the topic of discussion.” Pepper admitted, looking between them all.

Loki had already stepped away, cradling his mug in one hand and walking to join Strange at the window. “You know, I’ve never met a human practitioner of the arts.”

“It’s uncommon.” Strange agreed, quirking a brow. “I had heard tell that you fashioned yourself a sorcerer.”

“My mother instructed me, but my practice has changed since I came to live here.” He bowed his head slightly. “I’m loathe to talk work on a holiday but perhaps after the holidays pass we could meet somewhere for tea and talk shop?”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Fantastic.” Loki sipped his drink, paused, and gave Strange an appraising eye. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a dead ringer for Vincent Price?”

“Once or twice.” Strange deadpanned. “You and your brother sound curiously British, for being from off world.”

“Ah but that’s the AllSpeak coming through.”

“Merry Christmas everybody!” Wade came out of the elevator like a shot, wearing baggy well-worn jeans and a spectacularly ugly Christmas sweater, all of it on over his costume boots. He’d also found a Santa hat somewhere and it was crammed on his head at a jaunty angle.

Tony had to pause and realize yeah, that was kind of unfortunate. It reminded him more of full body road rash than healed third degree burns, but all the correct structure was there including ears so they’ve probably all seen worse. “Amazing sweater.”

“I went to an ugly sweater party last year.” Phil said, already filling a mug for Wade.

“My sweater won.” Clint said cheerfully.
“This is the most unlikely and best friendship I have ever seen.” Tony decided, looking back and forth between Phil and Clint to Wade.

“You’re just enjoying the free entertainment.”

“Well yeah, HawkAss, why else would I keep you around?”

“Great smile, enviable arm musculature, sense of humor?” Phil suggested.

“I’m not sure we’re friends. Are we friends?” Wade wanted to know, already halfway through his cider. “Do friends frequently arrest each other?”

“Frenemies.” Phil said after a beat.

“Friends. It’s Christmas.” Tony replied, pointing between them. “You can go back to being frenemies tomorrow.”

Wade beamed, and in spite of everything, he had straight white teeth and a goofy grin.

Christmas Day passed in a languor, any villains apparently deciding it was just too cold and snowy, or just that they weren’t that big of a dick today. Phil and Clint’s cinnamon rolls were devastating, naturally. There were other gifts, but mostly there was happy chatter and storytelling. Steve went into Christian holiday stories, and Thor went into Norse winter solstice stories, their warm voices filling the rumpus room. Strange contributed with odd stories of places unheard of by anyone else in the room.

Dinner was a much quieter affair than the previous eve, and afterwards Strange took his leave, though he asked to pick up his car once the roads cleared. Tony was ambivalent, and Strange disappeared in a swirl of his red cloak. Logan drove out the following morning, Wade asked to stay then saw himself out at two AM.
Phil told everyone it was best not to ask in the matters of Wade, but in general he didn’t say goodbye.

It was two days later that Reed Richards called.

“Stark, I need to borrow your prince!”

“Say what?” Tony wanted to know, sitting back from his table. “Did you just use your wire table as a telephone?”

“It worked. I got your attention. I need to borrow Loki.”

He looked at the projection of Reed for a moment, obscurely glad that Reed wasn’t stretched out in any way he could see. “Let me get him so you don’t have to explain yourself twice.” He left his workspace, Bruce striking up a conversation with Reed as he walked out.

Loki was standing in his ‘table’ space, surrounded by an exploded diagram of one of the new hard laptops. Midgardian technology might be years behind Asgardian but Loki had a begrudging respect for how Midgardians could cram so many components in a tight space and make them all still work.

“Reed Richards says he wants to borrow you.”

“Did he say why?”

“No and I’m curious so please come talk to him.”

Loki snorted and followed him back, walking in on Bruce and Reed speaking science very densely. “Hey Reed.”

Reed broke off in the middle of a sentence, giving Bruce an apologetic smile before focusing on Loki. “I need a huge favor, I need to borrow you and take you to a New Year’s Eve party.”
“My kind of favor so far. Why?”

“Diplomacy.”

“Ohhh.” Loki’s eyebrows went up. “You had my curiosity, now you have my attention.”

“Von Doom. Regular pain in our ass and has diplomatic immunity. We’ve been trying to broker for some peace but he’s gotten very huffy about his views on who may approach and address a monarch. Nevermind that America has no monarchy, and that he’s a self-declared monarch.”

“And I’m a crown prince. You realize as a total stranger and being outside his power structure I might not have the leverage you’re hoping for.”

“It’s worth a shot. You’ll have a better chance at candid conversation if nothing else. I can send you a write-up on the situation and what we hope to accomplish if you agree so you’re not going in blind.”

He considered, tching to himself. “Sounds fun. Certainly.”

“Can I send those files through this?” Reed looked to Tony. “I have write ups and previous attempts at agreements and a crap-ton of video.”

“Didn’t you get in a fight with Von Doom here a couple years ago?” Tony wanted to know, going through a few rapid fire hand motions to set up a peer to peer file transfer.

“Yeah that’s the same asshole.”

“Since when is he a king?”

“Because he said so apparently. He’s crowned himself king of Latveria.”

Tony blinked, looked at Loki (who shrugged, having just recently memorized the fifty states and the provinces of Canada), and at Bruce, who shook his head (being more familiar with Asia). “JARVIS,
can you…” A map of Europe popped up and zoomed, highlighting the nation and listing stats. “He crowned himself king of a postage stamp.”

“He’s from there originally. How that relates to his ascent to an apparent throne and why the people of the country are so good with it is another story entirely. Your buddy Coulson can probably give you a better rundown.”

“I’ll ask him.” Loki agreed as the files completed transfer, Tony grabbing the file in the floating display and tossing it to the floating indicator that would kick it to Loki’s table.

“Interesting way to spend New Year’s. Party down.” Tony snorted.

“You can survive a night without me. Besides, I’ve missed a bit of political shenanigans in my life, and you’d find it boring.”

“I don’t want any shenanigans anywhere near Doom.” Reed protested.

“Too bad, you asked a demigod of mischief for assistance. Shenanigans are guaranteed. I’ll start reviewing the information later today.” Loki smirked and went back to his workspace.

“What have I gotten myself into?”

“He won’t fuck you over but you might want to check any paperwork for unexpected clauses.” Tony said after a beat. “So, regarding the bifrost project. I need a project manager for it. Any ideas?”
“Good news!” Pepper said, heels clicking as she walked into the rumpus room and pausing. Tony and Loki were both absolutely intent on a co-op game of We Love Katamari. “Is that seriously how you two relax?”

“We’re in the zone. We got tired of Portal. I finalized the laptop design, it’s been sent to the appropriate factories to start the process.” Loki said, not looking up. “You said good news?”

“We’ve got property in Detroit. Hot off the fax machines.”

“It bothers me that we still use fax machines.” Tony said. “Do you mean all the property we want or some of it?”

“About eighty percent of it and the last twenty should finalize by the end of January. Can you bring up a map, JARVIS?” JARVIS did and she set the files down, bringing up her hands to zoom slightly, highlights showing what property they have.

“Just a second we’re beating our record.”

Five minutes later they’d saved and exited the game, joining her at the map, Loki pondering it as he took a sip of tea. He’d made it earlier, loose leaf and everything, trying to wean Tony off some of the coffee, to zero success. “You’ve bought entire blocks of housing.”

“Yeah we have. There’s a lot of empty lots, we did some looking around and found about six blocks of housing that’s savable with only a few lots empty. I’ve already got crews lined up to renovate everything and start turning them into corporate rentals. We’re trying to think ahead a bit.” Tony explained, looking at the map then moving it to look at the property for the construction site. “This was more difficult. It’s nearly two square miles. That’s a huge chunk of property in a city. We ended up abandoning the idea of trying to take over the former industrial complexes and went out of urban Detroit.”

“It’s a double edged sword. We were able to actually get property but we’re going to get some shit because we’re going to demolish suburban green space.” Pepper said, humming. “The property that’s pending is houses. We offered generous buyout packages, no one refused them but mortgages are slow.”
“Not exactly square I see. Is this the final plot shape?”

“Should be. Green is purchased, blue is pending the end of January. The powers that be in Detroit moved mountains to make this happen this fast.” Pepper said. “Of course I sent them the outline of the project. They’re so happy this is happening they’re going to send in wrecking balls to remove the buildings on the property.”

“Good, we need this property clear down to dirt. We have a lot of infrastructure to lay.” Tony hummed. “We still need a project manager.”

“I sent you a list.” Pepper gave him a look.

“I can’t move any of them and honestly none of them are up for it. I asked Richards, corporate stuff isn’t really his thing. I emailed Wayne, he said he’d look into it but…” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“That’s your I-have-a-terrible-idea face.” Loki said, staring at him.

“Oh god. No. That’s, no. Tony NO.” Pepper said, shaking her head vigorously back and forth.

“Tony-no what?” Loki looked at her, then back to him.

“Remember months ago when I told you my life story?” Tony said, rubbing his eyes.

“Well, yes.”

“That story started with a conversation about a very, very special asshole.”

Loki blinked. “The man we’ve avoided talking about around my brother lest he decide to avenge your slighted honor.”

Tony managed half a smile. “Yeah, that guy. Justin Hammer.”
“I do not approve. Period. No way. My foot is down.” Pepper said in a severe tone.

“I thought we didn’t like him. I was rather led to that impression given you called him a long list of names.”

“He’s a total asshole.”

“So was I.” Tony pointed out, looking at Pepper.

“You do not get to choose who gets a redemption story!”

“This isn’t about that! Okay maybe it’s a little about that. Look, what I’m saying here is he’s good at what he does when given the opportunity.”

“Evidence severely to the contrary, you showed me video.” Loki took a seat on a barstool and sipped his drink, resigning himself to this taking a while.

“He’s not a WMD designer. He’s a project manager.” Tony explained. “He got his reputation and became a CEO because he was very, very goddamn good at it. Years and years ago my company talked about hiring him then we realized how upwardly mobile he was. Massive project scopes are kind of his thing. And yeah I have never liked the jackass, okay, he’s a smile hiding a knife.”

“Poetic.” Loki deadpanned.

“However, he’s intelligent, good at his job and last I heard, badly in need of a better job anyway.”

“You did say he avoided arrest.”

“Doesn’t mean he kept his job. JARVIS, where’s Justin Hammer at these days?”

“Acquiring Hammer Industries’ corporate directory.” The map shuffled to the side and the company
webpage came up, JARVIS neatly accessing the employee databases. “Justin Hammer was removed from his position as CEO three months after the expo.” News articles popped up next to the webpage. “However, as his name is on the building, in an attempt to save face, he was not fired. He was demoted. He currently is a manager over Research and Development with no promotional opportunities. Other articles suggest that in the wake of many lawsuits, he sold his house, as well as several supercars and a very large boat.”

“That’s a lot of assets liquidated.” Loki said after a beat. “A rich man on this world, selling belongings? Stinks of desperation, really, businessmen in this country try to take money to their grave.”

“You’re not wrong.” Tony said after a beat. “That’s survival mode. From the standpoint of the top two percent, it’s rare but not stupid.”

“So, what, you’re going to walk up to him and offer him a job?” Pepper wanted to know, still clearly disapproving. “After years of pointedly ignoring or outright dissing him?”

“Oh, yeah. Why not?”

She put her head in her hands. “I could keep saying no but you’d do it anyway.” She said after a beat. “So, here’s the deal. You go talk to him personally and you take Loki with you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, no offense babe.”

“None taken.”

“No, you damn fool idiot, you need a bodyguard in case he’s still pissed at you. And you take the project schedule with you, a scratch copy. If he can crunch it by greater than twenty percent we talk about hiring him.”

“We have an entire department trying to work that schedule.” Tony pointed out.

“Exactly.”
“Hm, passing a gauntlet to achieve a job. I approve.” Loki tapped his chin. “When would we be doing this?”

“Sometime after New Year’s I guess, we have a lot going on.”

“CES is the first week of January, are you intending to be there?” Pepper wanted to know. “Because I have you scheduled.”

“Shit.” Tony groaned and put his hands in his hair. “JARVIS dismiss all this, bring up a calendar, and let’s all hope the villains stay in hibernation.”

“So, Victor Von Doom.” Phil said, walking into Loki’s workspace with a mug of coffee. “We need to talk about him and your little favor for Richards.”

“It was suggested I get a debrief from you. I’ve gone through a lot of information actually.” Loki saved his work (an experimental project he was volleying between several people that was put forward by Bruce Wayne, an air scrubber focused on removing lead), and shuffled displays on his workspace, bringing up the stacks of information he’d gathered up. “Richards sent me a file, failed treaty paperwork, and a lot of video. Just some idle reading on the internet put me through an interesting background. What’s your take?”

“He’s smart. Possibly as smart as Richards is, but a different kind of intelligence.” Phil pulled up one of the rolling stools, looking at Loki. “Do not try to put one over on him for fun, he’ll see right through that. Your best bet is to be politely cutting but totally honest. You’re royalty, you must know this game.”

“Are you speaking of Von Doom from experience?” He lifted an eyebrow.

“Yes, though not personal, I’ve never met the man. SHIELD’s had issues with Latveria since he took over. If you will allow the term, he rules with an iron fist and has no tolerance from outside agents. We lost a few good people before we pulled the remainder out and started just maintaining surveillance from across the border and by satellite.”

“That annoying hm?”
“Not enough square mileage of country to maintain that much risk to our agents. Same policy we have in place for North Korea.”

“So, he’s intelligent and unlikely to be sold a bridge. What else?”

“He’s a businessman. He’s that first and foremost really. He was wildly successful, enough to privately fund space exploration. There’s still a space station in orbit that he originally funded, though it’s now staffed internationally and supplied by various parties. He was on the station during the same event that made the Fantastic Four what they are, and gained some abilities from that. His body also started changing into an unknown metal. Somewhere during the immediate follow up his sanity slipped.” Phil sighed. “So, ruthless, cunning, hyper intelligent, prowess over electricity, partly metallic body. How he came to power in Latveria is still largely unknown, but the citizens there are loyal, and it doesn’t appear to be like North Korea, where people love the rulers or they’re sent to prison camps to die. The people in Latveria legitimately adore the man.”

“How’d he pull that off?”

“He appears to have tied his rise in power to the economy and jobs. Latveria was kind of backwater, no economic power to speak of, no high tech. But they’re mineral rich and the people are resourceful, and he’s a businessman. He was able to bankroll through some nations I won’t name and now employs the entire country he rules over, directly or indirectly. Since he did that he was able to bring in better education and health care.”

“So an iron fist in a velvet glove.”

Phil nodded at him as he sipped his coffee. “Precisely.”

“And occasionally he slips a cog and sends robots to annoy people he’s decided to dislike that week.”

“And that’s where we start having a problem. That’s what these negotiations surround. We need him to stop doing that shit and use his words to explain why he feels slighted instead of sending combat robots to smash shit up without saying why.”

“Does he always target the Fantastic Four?”
“Sometimes, sometimes not, he’s not very predictable. Though the Fantastic Four are who generally shows up to send the robots packing.”

Loki sat back, rubbing his chin for a moment as he considered the intel. “What does SHIELD want out of this? It can’t clash with what Richards wants, he asked me to do this, not you.”

“We’d like him to stop being a pain in the ass.”

He tched. “Oh my dear Agent, this man is royalty! That’ll never happen. Still, we might be able to appeal to his sense of mercy and stop attacks on areas with civilians.”

Phil considered. “We might settle for that, though it’s no good if he keeps taking out high dollar projects.”

“You’re asking for a ceasing of hostility. The question is why does he feel slighted? What is his perception and what can help soothe over that?” Loki asked. “And would we insult him by asking?”

“Congratulations, you’re now the team diplomat.”

“As I am likely the only one on the team with formal diplomacy training besides Thor, who can be forced into a formal situation and counted on not to embarrass himself but that’s about it, I’m not sure why this is news.” Loki located his own mug. “Though I suppose Tony does have a certain razzle-dazzle in certain crowds and Steve can charm most people, this is not a task either of them are up to.”

“Just try not to bond with Doom over your similar roots.”

“You wound me.” Loki took a long drag of his tea then put his attention back on Phil. “If this man is such a celebrated leader in his country, then why spend New Year’s Eve in New York, not his own nation? His most hated, or at least most contentious, enemies are here. Is he setting up to make a statement?”

“I asked the same question. He was invited to a party by one of his original investors, who happens to live here now. Said investor had put money toward his projects previously and has apparently made very good returns on her investment in Latveria. He regularly sends her gift baskets of their
apparently astounding chocolate."

He knew he was staring, but lord help him. “I don’t know what I was expecting.” He admitted after a beat, feeling mildly bewildered before shaking off. “Okay. Clearly I need to introduce myself to this woman while I’m at this get together. To that end, how am I getting in? I imagine it must be invitation only.”

Phil reached into his suit pocket and took out an ivory colored envelope with an actual wax seal, offering it out to Loki. “Already taken care of.”

“How’d you manage this?” He set his mug down and took the envelope, studying the wax seal.

“We didn’t. She approached us. She’s got business cards for a whole slew of agents at this point because of her rather interesting investment record. She wants both you and Thor there, we offered no guarantees.”

“Well, taking my brother would be a fiasco so she’ll just have to settle for me.” He opened the envelope and took the invitation out. “From a Ms. Olivia Collier. How old is she?”

“Fifty-three and about five years divorced. Expect to be eyed like a piece of meat.”

“Voice of experience?”

“She prefers younger men.”

Well, he can honestly say he never expected to be having this conversation. “Nevermind that I’m not that far from my first millennia.”

Phil shrugged. “Anything else you want to know?”

“This should be enough. I’ll do some reading on Latveria and its industry. Should all be quite enjoyable really.”
“The last black tie event you went to didn’t go nearly so well.” Phil stood. “So try not to remove anyone’s eyes this time.”

“It isn’t as if I intended to make a habit of doing so.” Loki put his nose in the air. Phil only rolled his eyes and saw himself out.

“Have to admit this wasn’t the circumstances I imagined when I fantasied in great deal about getting you into a tuxedo.”

“Then right back out of said tuxedo?” Loki wanted to know as he let Pepper fuss over his presentation. Loki didn’t mind, he recalled her doing the same thing to Tony before public events.

“Well, yes, after the circumstances I concocted of course.” Tony said, watching all this.

“His porn needs context.” Pepper said, not looking up from adjusting Loki’s tie. “There. And I know you always wear the coat we had made but it’s really not meant to be over formal wear so I got you a good overcoat and a scarf.”

“Tch, more’s the pity.” Loki studied himself in a full length mirror. “So what were these circumstances you came up with?”

“Theater mostly, you seem like you’d like Shakespeare.”

“I also like opera though not the last one I went to.”

Tony scoffed. “You don’t say. You going to be okay tonight man? You’re running this thing solo.”

“I will be fine. This is deception and charm; I think it is my wheelhouse. Though I don’t like being totally unarmed regardless. Phil tried to loan me a holster he said would hide under a tux, but…”

“You’re not really a guns sort of guy.” Tony finished. “Gimme a minute, actually…” He dipped out of the room to the bedroom, where Loki had left his staff, and came back carrying it and a box.
“Separate that out in half for me would you?” Loki did dubiously then Tony opened the box and held out a machined chunk of polished metal that’d been cut in the shape of an artsy snarling wolf, chips of green opals for the eyes. A braided black leather wrist strap was attached to it. “You seem like the sort of man who could make a walking stick perfectly stylish, and not at all pimp like.”

He took it and smiled, seeing it was threaded to match up with half of his staff, screwing it on and testing the heft of it. “That is marvelous, you thoughtful man. Thank you. I am sorry that I won’t be here to kiss you both to bring in the New Year.”

“You’re doing something important.” Pepper replied seriously. “Dr. Doom’s actions get people hurt. We can deal with getting our kisses a few hours later.”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine.” Tony agreed. “Just be careful, I got my hands on the guest list and you’re walking into a pit of vipers.”

“I promise not to make too many friends.” Loki gave them both a bright smile, and their laughter buoyed him out the door and down the road, riding in the back with Happy driving.

Sometimes Midgard just really reaches out and slaps Loki across the face in many metaphorical, interesting ways.

This place that had been rented out for this high-dollar party wasn’t anywhere Loki had ever personally been, and his experience with these events on this planet are limited, but it still feels like slipping into some kind of old routine as he thanks Happy and gets out of the car, walking up the sidewalk to enter the building. He hadn't bothered tying the scarf or doing up the coat so his skin flowed to blue and his eyes to red. He’s perfectly on time so he’s not the only one going inside but he’s the only one not hurrying, women clutching coats around them as their heels crunch on salted cement, men with an arm around them to steady them as they rushed. Loki strolled, the cane swinging with his walk and between his casual saunter and his skin color, everyone else had stopped mid step to watch him walk in.

The warmth of the building made his blue skin start to fade again as he produced his invitation and handed it to the people inside the door between two fingers with an easy smile, and he’s allowed by, the guards side-eying him as he hands over the cane for a glance over and passes a metal detector to no alarms. That very minor bit of security aside he’s strolling up a carpet in a lavish hall and it’s simultaneously so alien and so home it early punches the wind out of him.
Years upon years, Midgardian centuries, of events in Asgard and formal training in etiquette and diplomacy and a hundred other things, and here it all was, culminating in him checking his coat and scarf and following signs to walk through a tall arched door. An art museum was as good a place as any for this sort of thing, he decided, looking around. They’d found places to put catering tables and there was a live string quartet somewhere nearby. A man in a tux and gloves looked at him and he took a card out and passed it to him without a beat.

“Loki Laufeyson, crown Prince of Asgard!” The man’s voice carries and the other guests nearby look to where Loki is standing, most seeming surprised.

He does have to wonder what Odin thinks of this, of his adopted son using all his instruction to work as a spy on Midgard.

Mother might approve.

He put those thoughts out of his mind and further entered the cavernous room full of gorgeous things, greeting those that came to meet him with a smile, shaking and kissing hands as necessary. Miss Olivia Collier appeared almost immediately and he went into a bow before kissing her hand. He’d of course done reading so he was prepared for the tall, stately black woman that arrived.

“Thank you so much for the invitation, milady.”

To his delight, her laugh was anything but polished, it was a brash cackle, one of her hands on her hips. “Oh, no, thank you. I only got tall dark and handsome, hm? No tall blonde and beefy?”

He guffawed in spite of himself. “Thor is a bull in a china shop, not suited to rooms full of beautiful things I am afraid. You are not what I expected, I confess.”

She grinned and took his arm. “I didn’t start out with money dear, I scratched out other peoples’ eyes for it. Shall I introduce you around?”

“Yes, and I shall try very hard not to like you too much.”

“Your funeral dear, I am utterly uncouth and a rocker of boats, whose questionable taste in men is only outmatched by my ostentatious taste in jewelry.”
It was only by sheer will that Loki did not at that moment take a selfie with Miss Collier and send it to Tony declaring he’d just found his new best friend and that he didn’t care how hard Phil disapproved.

Miss Collier (“Oh no, absolutely not, call me Olivia.”) got him a glass of the ‘good’ wine (some ice wine from a winery he didn’t recognize but that didn’t say much) and happily introduced him around the room. He was an old hand at remembering names and while he was no Midgardian businessman, Pepper had rubbed off on him enough that he was able to hold some conversations.

A lot of business partners, and some people that just traveled in those circles. Admittedly not people he knowingly associated with most of the time because they tended to bring his mania right to the surface but he smiled nicely and played the charming crown prince. It was quite a crowd and it was most of an hour before he was introduced to Victor Von Doom.

Partly because Von Doom apparently wasn’t mingling as much, instead neatly avoiding most of the casual conversation in favor of perusing artwork. Still, his greeting to Olivia was warm, almost fond if Loki was any judge, and he clearly started paying more attention when she introduced Loki as a prince. Of course voice was nearly all he had to go on, the mask gave nothing away, and the very human green eyes looking out of it were clinical.

“Loki of Asgard?” Von Doom said, regarding him for a moment. “There is a prophecy in my country about you.”

“Oh, well now you’ve piqued my curiosity. Do you care to share it, your Majesty?”

“You boys play nice.” Olivia warned before excusing herself, leaving them standing in front of a large painting.

“I don’t think either of us cares to damage the lovely things here.” Loki called after her before looking back to Von Doom. “So. A prophecy?”

“Yes. It says you will be the downfall of Latveria.”

Loki blinked, considered, then sighed and shrugged wide. “At the risk of insulting you, I only learned where Latveria is on the map last week. There was a time when Thor and I often came to Midgard, but your country was not organized like it is now, yes? All the borders are different.”
Von Doom hummed. “You’re saying you don’t know how you could destroy something that you didn’t know existed previously, and are barely aware of now.”

“And certainly I don’t care to destroy any countries here. I am in exile from Asgard, this world is my home now, and my passport is American only because this is where I happened to crash land, if you will allow.”

The other man’s head tipped slightly, then he laughed, loud and rich. “Actually, I understand better than you know. So. Which Agency sent you to trouble me?”

“Oh, well, SHIELD of course, who else would it be?”

“We should sit down for this conversation.”

“I agree! Preferably someplace with more wine, and some good paintings.” He paused and frowned at the one they were standing by. “Though not by this artist.”

Von Doom stared at the canvas, then nodded once. “Wine, and a place to sit while you regale me with the demands of your rather pathetic employers.”

Loki of course didn’t have any official paperwork on him, though really that wasn’t the point here. It was, in his opinion, more about actually establishing a dialogue. Von Doom was stiff, forcibly distant really, but he was a monarch and Loki respected it. Perhaps he was being a bit less polite than he’d normally be to a foreign diplomat but, Von Doom didn’t seem interested in flowery language and dancing around the problem.

He did, however, say he didn’t want this conversation overshadowing his entire evening, and graciously agreed to a half-hour one-on-one conversation with Loki, which Loki thought was just long enough to lay out an outline of the concerns voiced to him and why working to stop the attacks would be mutually beneficial.

“I think in the end you are giving my employers, along with many other politicians, far too much credit. You think they’re more clever than they are.” Loki told Von Doom frankly.
“Well, I’m not going to defend them. Even Richards, though on occasion we match wits.” Von Doom cradled his wine glass. They’d found a relatively quiet wing, not far off the party, where they could sit on benches across from each other. That left distance between them, but perhaps it was for the best. “How do I overestimate them, then?”

“Your attacks. They can’t find a pattern, and can’t guess at your motive, which means they’re frustrated at how to stop you. Certainly your diplomatic immunity is holding now, and maybe it always will, but your reputation? That’s another story. You industrialized your nation, you are selling products worldwide, yes? That’s something to be extremely proud of.”

“Yes. Latveria is stronger than it ever has been.”

“Indeed, I did a lot of reading and it’s quite impressive. But, if these attacks continue and they can be traced decisively to you, you could undermine your recent economic success. Frankly, sir, all it would take is someone starting to enforce an import embargo on your products. Certainly you’d always have some customers because I suspect China has no moral compass in relation to its business deals, however, if the UN or EU decided to slap you with those sanctions in response to repeat loss of civilian life in connection to your military devices…”

“They wouldn’t dare.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow. “Have you seen the state of world politics? I’m not saying they will, I hardly know these things, however, it would be one way to answer the attacks without bringing it to war. From a certain outside perspective, sir, the behavior of these attacks is juvenile, and beneath you. Even if you’re just trying to annoy the shit out of Reed Richards and his spandex wearing roommates there are better ways to do it.”

“You talk a lot.”

“Well, I am the Silver Tongue.”

Von Doom was silent for a few minutes, finishing his wine before standing. “I don’t like you, or trust you, but you have raised some salient points and asked for very little. You want me to start a dialogue rather than aggression that could injure people who have done nothing to gain my ire. I shall consider it but if it happens, it will happen under my terms.”
Loki stood and bowed from the waist. “I would not ask for anything more than that, your Majesty. Thank you so much for your time, I would take up any more of it.” He let Von Doom exit first and followed at a sedate pace, rejoining the rest of the party.

It was still a good bit off midnight and he just settled into socializing and being a good party guest. After all he wasn’t actually invited to talk to Von Doom, in spite of his motives for being here. And yes, most of the people here are absolute wastes of space in his mind but he finds a few people he likes enough to exchange phone numbers with. Olivia in particular is someone he’d love to meet for coffee on occasion and to his delight, she agrees.

He’s standing with a small gathering and at their insistence he’s spoken a bit about Asgard and a bit about the Avengers (everyone loves Steve) when another voice cuts in and he almost flips the walking stick and strikes the speaker on sheer reflex.

“Well you’re certainly getting around.” Aldrich Killian’s smile was sharp behind a casual semi-drunk glaze of relaxation, eying him.

“Well, yes, it turns out when you’re an alien it’s spectacularly easy to get invited to parties.” Loki replied without missing a beat even as his hand worked slowly to trace the details on the wolf that’s the head of his cane. “Or maybe it’s the Royalty bit. Depends who you ask.”

“I guess there are free rides.” Killian eyed him.

“How I serve my sentence is not your concern.”

“Oh, I heard about the Prince-in-Exile story.” One of the women in the group said. “Though I dare say we never heard the story of why you were exiled.”

“Nothing much. Tried to blow up the planet of my birth, nearly succeeded. What can I say, I took the news of my adoption quite poorly.” He drained his wine in the silence that followed. Killian eyed him contemplatively and moved away, Loki sighing in his absence. “What a bilgesnipe of a man.”

“Wait, was that story real?” One of the men asked.

“Well. Yes. In my defense, it made sense at the time.”
“It does put some perspective on my son painting his bedroom walls black.”

He had to smile at that.

It was two AM when Loki wandered into the rumpus room, his tie open and feeling generally satisfied with the evening.

“Well look what the cat dragged in.” Tony said by way of greeting. He was wearing a patriotic feather boa and novelty glasses.

“I thought that everyone would still be awake.” The setup that had taken weapons and coats during the Christmas party was now apparently a permanent installation and Loki left his long coat, scarf, tux jacket and cane on it, meandering further into the room. The room was randomly festooned with New Year’s streamers and balloons and most of the group had party hats on. “How was the ball drop?”

“None of us went. We just watched it on TV.” Steve replied. “It was different back in the day. Hell there wasn’t a ball drop at all the last few years before I went to the war.”

“We had the TV on as background noise.” Bruce was in the kitchen/bar area and was pouring tea, at Loki’s look he got down another mug and filled that one too. “We’re playing Cards against Humanity.”

“Is there room for one more?”

“Of course there is, get over here. You might actually beat Pepper, she’s won two games in a row.” Clint replied.

“We’re going through and changing out the black cards right now. And we saved a blank white card for you to write on.” Tony said, shifting over. Everyone was sitting on the floor around a low table that had mysteriously appeared.
Loki sat down and kissed Tony and Pepper in turn before accepting a hat and party horn from Phil, who appeared to be covered in roughly half the glitter that existed in the state of New York. “Happy New Year, everyone.”
Alright, so, everyone reading this has been very very patient and if you're still reading this, thank you!

That said part of my delay was frankly I was almost intimidated by the sheer scope. Though I do not intend to go the route of Age of Ultron at this time, I still have to compensate somehow for Iron Man 3, Thor 2, and Winter Soldier while dealing with the story's own plot points. That was frankly mind bending, then I realized, fuck, I'm way overthinking things.

Recent fics I've wrote have pretty much proven out that the less I think the better my writing is. My writing is apparently best when I wrote flow of consciousness and let the characters off their chains. As such, I did that for this fic and got a chapter done in about four days.

So, let the reader beware: it might be silly season, because these people live in an absolutely insane world. I promise you, there will be serious points and drama but in the meantime let's lighten the fuck up and appreciate that this is a comic book world.

In other words, less Invincible Iron Man, more Avengers Assemble.

Onward. Give me feedback.

Naturally, various villains came out of hibernation right before CES happened. Some of them the Avengers got involved with, some of them Tony put in phone calls to other heroes wanting to know if they needed assistance. In the end, they were too busy arguing about who’s bright idea it was to clone dinosaurs (or dinosaur-like creatures, Bruce argued) then cut them loose in Central Park in January for Tony to actually get to CES.

Which turned out not to be a problem at all because Jarvis ran the show.

Jarvis showed Tony what he’d been up to without telling only two days before CES started and Tony had been impressed enough he’d just told Jarvis to run with it. Holograph projectors allowed Jarvis to do presentations and talk to people at the SI booth, though he neatly deflected questions about who or what exactly he was.

“The phone has debuted beautifully, sir.” Jarvis informed them, popping back into the tower and seeming bemused at the chaos even though he’d technically never left.
“We don’t know where it came from or where it’s been!” Tony was telling Clint, who had on a ‘Slap the Cook’s ass’ apron and a determined look. “One moment, Jarvis.”

“Certainly sir.”

“Look, I’m just saying the chance to eat a dinosaur does not come up every day and we should take it.” Clint argued, waving a meat fork.

“Dinosaur-like.” Bruce was wrapped in a blanket and drinking tea.

“Whatever. Triceratops-like. Massive ribs and steaks like the Flintstones I say we grill the fucker.”

“I’ll eat it if you won’t.” Thor said.

“He’s not lying, I spent half our childhoods feeding him things that weren’t advisable.” Loki agreed.

“Phil! Help me explain to these barbarians that we should NOT be eating the dinosaur!”

“I’m just wondering about the logistics.” Phil was in the kitchen of the rumpus room making a massive pot of Mexican hot chocolate, and by the looks of the peppermint schnapps bottle in his hand he was about to introduce liquor to the equation. “It’s not going to fit in the oven. The grill might take it but the grill’s not going to do well in this weather.”

Tony buried his face in his hands and made a frustrated noise. There were, Jarvis noted, the remains of a dinosaur (dinosaur-like creature?) on the balcony, probably being kept good by virtue of the wind chill being well below zero. He’d been present for the fight of course, as much as he was present for any battle involving Iron Man or the Avengers, so he was aware that a few of the dinosaurs were now in the hands of the local zoos as they hadn’t been hostile so much as cold and panicking. The Hulk had collected them and brought them to a livestock semi-truck someone had found so now there was a picture on the internet of the Hulk carrying a gallimimus under his arm to the truck while it complained, loudly, about the fact.

Someone had seen Jurassic Park one too many times. They still had no leads on who exactly had done this, or why. For all they knew it was for giggles.
“Sir?”

“Ah. Right. Sorry J.” Tony turned to face him, clearly trying to shake the situation off for the moment. Loki moved to join them. “You were saying about the phone?”

“It’s well liked, though the consensus is it needs its own name, not a number. Though name suggestions have been things like ‘Stark Bare’ and so on.” Jarvis reported. “No one else has a phone like this on display. The clarity of the screen is the most remarked on feature, though there are concerns about screen cracks.”

“Brilliant. Think we’ll get positive press?”

“We already are, sir.”

“How about the laptop?” Loki wanted to know.

“Also very well received, and the gentleman whose apparent job is to break everything he gets his hands on managed not to break it in spite of his best efforts. Though he did seem rather surprised when the screen came off and I had to explain that it’s supposed to do that.”

“I don’t miss going to these shows, thanks for handing it, J.” Tony shook his head.

“It’s been a delightful experience sir.”

“We have this massive fireplace why can’t we just cook it there?” Clint was asking Phil.

“I think Tony’s point was that it might not be safe to eat.” Bruce told him.

“No time like the present to find out.”

“Aye, a roast over a fire is a fantastic way to end a battle against wild beasts.” Thor agreed.
“We are analyzing it before you are eating it.” Tony snapped.

“Then get it on it so we can!” Clint whined.

“This is a ridiculous situation.” He rubbed his face again.

“Maybe but it’s also hilarious, how often do we have a call out that ends like this?” Steve wanted to know. “We should totally keep the skull.”

“Someone, somewhere, is already writing us angry letters for killing this thing even though it had charged and destroyed a cop car. You and I both know this. I’m not saying that it wouldn’t be awesome…”

“Do it for the awesome. Someone’s always writing us angry letters.”

“Ugh. FINE. Okay. Asgardian wonder twins, have you two butchered large creatures before?”

“You jest. Of course we have.” Loki replied. Thor grinned.

“Get to it. Bring me a sample I can put through some machines to make sure it’s not carrying a disease that will kill us or is molecularly unstable or something.” He watched them both go out to the balcony, having a short discussion before Thor came in and liberated the largest kitchen knives they had.

“So, what do you think? Cloning, base-up fabrication, time travel, alternative universe?” Bruce asked, looking at Tony.

“Please, no time travel, I don’t want to spend the next week concerned about stepping on butterfly paradoxes.”

“Realistically we’ll probably start seeing a lot more of this.” Phil was ladling hot chocolate into a variety of mugs.
“What, dinosaurs? I hope you’re kidding. Not that this wasn’t fun and all but I’m not sure I want it happening on a regular basis.” Steve stared at him.

“No, not dinosaurs specifically. People using their powers not for good or evil but for the past time of fucking with people.”

“Trolling is a time honored hobby.” Clint agreed.

“Pandora’s box got opened with you, Captain, then got more public when you said the hell with a cover story, Tony.” Phil handed them both mugs. “While public awareness means we don’t have to work quite so hard at covering things up, sometimes at least, it also means that there’s starting to be a little bit of acceptance for people who are differently human and with that acceptance comes shenanigans.”

“Makes sense.” Steve agreed after a beat. “Not everyone’s going to want to be a hero or a villain. Most people want to be left alone but, if you’re different why not have a good time.”

“Or at least amuse yourself by baffling others.” Natasha accepted a mug from Phil.

“I do that anyway.” Phil smiled a touch.

“Since we are alone, brother, I’d like a word with you away from the others.” Loki had still been partly in his battle kit so he was using one of his combat knives to separate pebbly thick hide from the carcass. Thor had actually been the one to lay claim to the kill and haul it here. Loki is impressed given this is an easy two tons of animal but he’s not going to admit that to Thor.

“Certainly. Let me give this to the Man of Iron because I agree with Clint, this would make for a fantastic feast.” Thor ducked back inside to pass off what was probably half a pound of flesh to Tony, then came back out, largely not bothered by the cold. “What do you wish to discuss?”

“Our friends. Their lifespans.” Loki admitted, keeping his eyes on his work.

“Loki. We both know that humans are candles in the wind. I hate knowing that we will outlive them,
even with you as you currently are, but the human mind doesn’t take well to lives as long as ours. There are legends aplenty about that.” He frowned at him.

“Tony doesn’t think he’ll make sixty. Am I to have less than two Midgardian decades of happiness?”

Thor considered this for a moment, during which he cleaved skull from body, setting the massive horned head aside before helping Loki start breaking down the rest. While it’s not an animal they’ve butchered after a hunt previously gone on, there’s not a lot of difference, either. “Where are you going with this? You wouldn’t bring this up just to complain about it. You have a scheme.”

Loki pointed the knife at him. “I do have a scheme, and you may even like it because it will mean more time for you to spend with our friends.”

“I would enjoy that but I would not wish immortality of any form on them.”

“No, no. Not immortality.” Loki flipped a hand in the air dismissively. “That’s a discussion for a later date. No, how about youth?”

“Youth?” Thor grunted as he helped break a massive rack of ribs free, holding it up to consider it.

“How are we going to cook that?” Loki wanted to know.

“On the fire! Now what do you mean by youth?”

“I am a sorcerer, and time can be bent. Steve is still young, Natasha as well, but the others? In the middle of their years, and in some cases their youth all but stolen, by others or their own actions.” Loki watched Thor’s face as he spoke.

“You mean to make them young again? How young?”

“I’d aim for about as old as their Captain. I speak to you of this because while I am still practicing my magic, I don’t have as much power as I used to. You do, you’re a wellspring of it. So I ask you, brother, would you be willing to trust my magic to see our friends young and in their primes?”
“You play dangerous games.”

“I always have.” Loki agreed without hesitation. “But at least now I play them for love?”

“It makes you no less reckless.”

“Oh, and you are one to talk.” Even only using the side of the animal they’re working on, they have massive pieces of meat freed and laying on the hide now, loin and shoulder and tail, lean and red.

“So I know what I speak of.” Thor surveyed the carcass. “We should donate the rest to the hungry of the city.”

“Brilliant idea, I’m sure some law will prevent it. We shall sell it to the rich and use their money to feed the hungry of the city. So, is that a no to my scheme?”

Thor looked at him, then nodded once. “I do trust you, brother, but if it does not go right…”

“Oh, do relax. The backlash is only likely to kill me, not the others.”

“That does not fill me with confidence.”

“Since when have my spells ever ended badly?”

“Would you like me to bring you an annotated compendium from home?”

The door opened and Clint stuck his head out, grinning. “Tony put the meat in some high tech gadget and he couldn’t find any dangerous diseases. Let’s do this.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I will let you know when I can explain further.” He told Thor and helped lift the rack of ribs to get it through the door.
“To the kitchen to get it trimmed up.”

“This is going to be so messy.” Phil observed as the ribs were hauled in, and cleared the counter.

It turned out that dinosaur tasted like elk. It was actually delicious, and the Avengers had to empty a deep freezer to fill it full of cut down chunks of meat wrapped in butcher paper with the cut wrote in marker. And that was just what they were keeping, the rest of the animal was broke down, wrapped, and left on the balcony because Tony agreed that auctioning it off to rich people to fund feeding the actual hungry was a fantastic idea. The skull, skeleton, skin, and organs were given to the semi-baffled but thankful local museum, who had to figure out how to taxidermy a triceratops. The Avengers offered no explanation on where the meat was or why the ribs were snapped off. The auction was wildly successful, and set a new Guinness book of records for most expensive meat per pound.

It was a week after CES and dinosaur wrangling in Central Park, and Loki was in his workspace, switching back and forth between the plan for the grounds of the bifrost, and his spell writing. Jarvis had put his spellwork in a private file, which Tony had ignored besides an apparently requisite demand that he share all his porn. He’d seemed a bit intrigued at the spellwork explanation but had left it alone, which had probably taken a lot of effort on Tony’s part, the shorter man being of the opinion that no knowledge should be kept from him, ever.

“Parking.” Loki said out loud, frustrated, looking at the map of the land they had.

“We will need quite a bit of it.” Jarvis agreed.

“I don’t want this facility to become an endless sea of concrete. There will already be so much of it, with the main facility and four power plants and multiple labs.” Loki dithered. Arc reactors were at least reasonably compact, by the standard of a reactor, and they did have a lot of space to work. The plot was rectangular, and at the moment Loki had the bifrost off-center, with two reactors on one side, and the lab buildings and the two reactors on the other side. Plenty of greenspace at the moment, with sidewalks and elevated glassed in walkways (Tony called them hamster tubes) because the weather in Michigan was notoriously cold in the winter. But right now, there was no parking.
And with an estimated staff of six to seven hundred just for the power plants, an unknown number for the labs and another unknown for the bifrost, even with shift work, he really did need to have space for four or five hundred cars.

“Fucking Midgardian transportation.” Loki muttered into his coffee.

“That is the sound of someone who needs to get out of the lab for a while.” Tony decided, standing in the doorway staring at the map Loki had up.

“Might be guilty of that, but I need to get this finalized. I know we cannot start construction until it’s warmer but before any planning can be done in detail, a blueprint must exist.” Loki replied.

“We have blueprints for all the buildings. It’s just a matter of where they’re going.” Tony walked over and stood so he could lean back on Loki’s chest, wrapping Loki’s free arm around himself as he contemplated it. “So what’s the issue?”

“Parking. I don’t to give up the greenspace for parking lots.”

“So don’t. Put in two parking garages, one on each end. Smaller footprint and we can cover them in solar panels, power the site’s lighting with them.” Tony drew squares on the map with his finger to put proposed garages on it. “Underground tunnels would be more energy efficient to connect the buildings and we could put powered walkways in like airports.”

“Noted.” Loki was almost impressed. “So what brings you to my office?”

“Want to come to Malibu with me?”

He blinked. “What, right now?”

“Yeah, let’s go bother Justin Hammer. I have the folders for the project management group, let’s go recruit him. If we leave now we’ll be in Malibu, like, just after lunchtime.”

“Does he work on Saturday?”
“We’ll bother him at home.”

“Does Pepper know we’re going to Malibu?”

“Yes, I told her it’s an overnight trip, there and back.”

“Why right now?”

Tony brought up a floating keyboard and typed, and then had a news story up, looking up at Loki as Loki read it. “He got fired this past Monday.”

“Hammer Advanced Weapons Systems has released Justin Hammer from his job as R&D manager, with creative differences being cited as the reason.” Loki read out loud. “You going to go be his hero?”

He grinned. “Hell yes I am.”

The flight to Malibu was actually somewhat uneventful, with Loki and Tony flying first class instead of on one of Tony’s airplanes, simply because he’d been able to get tickets and it was faster than getting one of his planes to New York on short notice. They spent the flight with Tony leaning into Loki’s space, both staring the same laptop screen and arguing about CES coverage and media impressions and if anything needed to change before production models started rolling out.

They were on the way to Justin’s house when the topic turned to who they were visiting and the project.

“The point is my time’s already strained, I can’t give a project like this the attention it needs. Neither can Richards or Wayne. We’re probably looking at over five years for construction.” Tony said.

He’d had a service bring him one of his cars, because while he’d sold his house, some of his cars remained in California in storage, and one had been brought to the airport for him.
“Well, I think everyone would understand that. I think where the issue starts is that you want to ask this man to do it. Do you really think he’ll be happy to see you?” Loki wanted to know.

“Probably not. But, I’m the bearer of good news so that’ll have to smooth it over.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that.”

“I wouldn’t either. He’s in a fucked position, man, and I’m arriving as assistance.”

“Mm, yes, and he could arguably have said the same about his interaction with Vanko and you saw how that went.”

Tony looked at him. “You’re a pessimist today.”

“No, I’m a realist. You’re several steps ahead of yourself.”

“Gotta fly before you learn to walk.”

Tony was following the GPS in his car and eventually it led them deep into the suburbs of Los Angeles. It was probably still expensive, because Loki had gotten the idea that nothing was cheap in California, but it definitely wasn’t the sort of neighborhood he’d associate with someone who was formerly a CEO. The houses were nice, but close together with small yards. The one Tony parked on the street in front of had an older BMW parked in the driveway.

“Not what I expected.” Loki admitted as they got out.

Tony got a set of binders out of the back seat then straightened up, locking the car. “He used to live in Malibu, I guess he moved here when he sold all his assets after the Expo.”

“Ah. I must say the change of weather is nice.”

“You like the cold.” Tony was already heading up the walkway to the door.
“Yes, but I also occasionally like variety.”

Tony shifted the binders to carry them with one arm and rang the doorbell, standing on the porch and looking around idly. After a moment the door opened, a dark-haired man looking at them for a moment before looking shocked. “I know who you are.”

“Yeah, a lot of people do.” Tony agreed. “Is Hammer here?”

“Yes, he is, just a moment. Justin! There’s someone at the door for you!” The man stepped away, leaving them on the porch looking at each other, then at the door again, where a furry ball with a nose had poked its head up to look out at them.

“I honestly don’t know what that is.” Loki said, staring down at it.

“I’m not entirely sure either.” Tony admitted. “I think it’s a rabbit, but don’t quote me.”

Any further contemplation of the giant cottonball was cut off by Justin Hammer appearing, leaning a shoulder on the doorframe and giving them an exhausted look. The three piece suit was gone, as was the executive-style hair, instead he was in worn jeans and a t-shirt, hair buzzed short. “You have some nerve, Stark. Come to gloat?”

“Gloat about what? I’m here to talk.”

“You’ve never wanted to talk to me before.”

“I was an asshole. I’m still an asshole, but some things have changed and I have a proposal that could be mutually beneficial.”

Justin stared at him, looked at Loki, then back at Tony. “Who’s tall dark and Tim Burton-esque?”

“Loki. Boyfriend, fellow project lead, on bodyguard duty.”
That made the man sort of laugh and unlock the screen door, opening it. “I’m not that big of a raging prick. Fine. You have five minutes to intrigue me. I can’t say I’m shocked that you only are willing to talk to me when I might be useful.”

“That’s when I talk to everybody, you’re not special.” Tony breezed in cheerfully, carefully stepping around the ambulatory cottonball that immediately started smelling Loki’s legs when he stepped in.

“As glad as I am to know that you somehow haven’t changed at all in spite of presumably spending a lot of time around Captain America, what brings you to my house?” They ended up in the living room. It wasn’t large, but the furniture was very nice. Everything felt well appointed, comfortable and slightly too large for the house containing it.

“You need a job.”

“Thank you for reminding me.”

Tony held up the binders. “I’m here to offer you one.”

“Yeah, I believe that. What are those?”

“Oh, just the current project management schedule. Crunch it by twenty percent time length and the job’s yours. Project management and oversight of the project and if it goes off without too many hitches you’ll be VIP over the site once it’s operational.”

Justin stared at him for a moment. “Bullshit. You have no reason to offer me this. You tried to send me to jail for fuck’s sake.”

“Dude you were buddying up with Russian criminals, you can’t blame me for that. And I have every reason to offer you this. I need a competent project manager. I know you’re up for it.”

Loki was wandering, looking at the pictures on the wall, all long-cast shadows from Justin’s former life. Newspaper articles, design patents, photographs. The rabbit was at his heels, still smelling him.

Justin stared at Tony with narrowed eyes before reaching out and taking the binders, opening the top
“Cupcake?”

“Yeah baby?” The dark haired man poked his head out of the kitchen.

“Will you come get Marshmallow he’s bothering one of our guests.”

“Not really bothering me. I’m not human, probably I smell quite strange to it.” Loki is droll. The dark haired man came and scooped up the rabbit anyway, toting it out of the room.

“Proposed construction time, seven years, proposed budget…” Justin read out loud as he walked to the kitchen table instead, pausing. “Holy shit, Stark. What are you building?”

“Oh, you know, nothing much. Just four reactors and a stargate in Detroit. Probably over a thousand jobs once done, mostly STEM.” Tony shrugged.

“And you have no project manager.”

“I have an entire department that’s responsible for this current mess.” He gestured at the binders. “No real overall supervision. That’d be you, maybe.”

“What's the catch?”

“Well. You have to move to Detroit and live there because you need to be there, in person.”

“Oh I love snow!” Cupcake said from the kitchen.

“You won’t after a year in Detroit.” Tony advised him.

“I assume this is my copy to tear apart.” Justin was flipping through the first binder, pausing to look at Tony.
“You assume right.”

“And I need to crunch the time schedule by twenty percent to prove I’m good for it.”

“Give or take.”

“How long do I have to do that?”

“The rest of today. Have I sufficiently intrigued you?”

Justin snorted and opened both binders up. “Yes. You have. Sit down, relax, and let daddy work.”

In the first conversation that Loki, Tony, and Pepper had had about bringing Justin in for this, Tony had called Justin ‘a smile hiding a knife.’ Loki ended up seated at the table, watching Justin work and talk to Tony, and while that might be true, he’s not seeing it.

Justin Hammer seems more like walking wounded to him. Yes, not hurt in any real physical way, or even necessarily emotional, this is a man robbed of all productive purpose, really of all this reasons to live. A man with his livelihood forcibly taken away and now facing what probably seemed like an increasingly dim and pointless future, even if he has companionship. Certainly, Tony’s assistance was probably a bitter pill to accept. Help always was.

Loki can relate to that a little.

“You two are on east coast time aren’t you?” Cupcake, whose real name had still eluded Tony and Loki, came out of the kitchen toting a jug that smelled like wine and was full of fruit, lining up glasses and filling them. “You must be hungry.”

“I wouldn’t say no.” Tony replied, looking up. The table was a mass of paperwork. Justin had already dismissed most of the schedule that was set up and was going through major work task by major work task, sorting them into piles by order of operations. He’d also gotten blank paper and laid a bunch of it end to end, taping it together to create a chain as long as the table was, and was hand jotting notes on a legal pad. Clearly he was off in some world dictated mostly by dates and planning.
“But I won’t insist on you feeding us either, I know we showed up unannounced.”

“You arrived with a job offer; your failure to call ahead is forgiven.” He passed out glasses, Justin’s fingers brushing over his hand in apparent thanks.

Loki stared into his glass of booze and fruit then looked at Tony, who took a sip before smiling at Loki. “It’s sangria. A pretty decent mix, too.”

“No no no, half of this is wrong, none of these construction times make any sense unless you have magical cement that can set in half the time.” Justin muttered. “I’ve managed big projects before, someone’s lying to you this is bullshit.”

Loki rolled his eyes and stood, following Cupcake into the kitchen. “Give me something to do since apparently those two aren’t going to murder each other.”

“Well, I’m not going to ask a guest to help but if you want to, you can chop vegetables for me.” Cupcake got out a bamboo cutting board and a chef’s knife, giving both to Loki.

Loki found space to set the cutting board on the island of the kitchen, dubiously accepting an onion and setting about peeling it. This, at least, he understands. He doesn’t cook much in Avengers tower but he’s been dubbed a prep chef reasonably often, as the standing rule seemed to be that those that weren’t cooking should help. “Am I allowed to ask how you two met?”

“We’re both on probation.” Cupcake blinked at him. “He was going through some stuff, you know? After the Expo. We were in a class together, we hit it off.”

Loki stared. “How normal.”

He snorted. “Yeah to you maybe. He knew who you are, you know. He just wanted an introduction.”

“We’ve been led to believe he’s a patron of the team’s youtube account.”

Cupcake got a package of raw chicken from the fridge. “We both are. I don’t know who does the
music videos for you guys but they’re awesome, and the highlight of our week.”

Loki had the ends off the onion and had to pause to reflect that apparently their youtube updated weekly. Jarvis was busy. “The manager of the account thinks he has a flair for putting the videos together.”

“He so totally does.” He considered him. “We thought Stark was dating his CEO.”

Loki shrugged. “He is. He’s also dating me.”

“Scandalous. So who’s Captain America seeing?”

“Are you prying me for Avengers gossip?” He can’t help it, he’s amused.

“Of course I am, what do you take me for?”

“You need to fire half of these people!” Justin’s voice burst from the dining room.

“Well if you get the job they’ll be your employees, do what you will but if you come in as an axe man they’ll remember that.” Tony replied.

“This might shock you but I was a competent CEO for several years, Stark. And this? This is at least half bullshit and lies. I can set up a schedule that in my opinion is much more sensible, but I can’t swear to its accuracy because all of these time estimates seem totally fabricated. Can you get these people on the phone, I need to ask some questions before I start trying to mark out a schedule or my efforts will be useless.”

Tony was looking at Justin, not the numbers on the printouts Justin was so vigorously indicating, thoughtful. “Have to admit calling out my employees like that takes some stones. You’re basing this on build time?”

“These are abstracts but I know a little something-something about building major facilities.” Justin had sorted the different projects into piles then further sorted them for their own timelines. “The depth of concrete you need poured for a heavy industrial building like a reactor? This is multiple
pours over a lot of rebar and superstructure. There’s no way it’ll go this fast, they’ll be building further on still curing concrete and it’ll go straight to shit. Not to mention we’re going to be dependent on delivery. Are you going to have an in-city cement plant supporting you? Are you buying anything from overseas? What work crews are you hiring?”

“Put what you think best case scenario numbers are on the projects and work from there. We’ll adjust as need be. As for the work crews I intended to leave that ball entirely in your court, though hiring local is highly encouraged.”

“Shit I’ll hire half of Detroit if they can show up sober and have equipment driving licenses.”

Loki rolled his eyes and finished chopping the onion, accepting a pair of bell peppers from Cupcake and dispatching those as well.

“Not used to working in a kitchen are you?” Cupcake watched his careful handling of the peppers and the knife.

“Mm, no, I’m Asgardian royalty; Thor and I’s interaction with the kitchen was sneaking in to filch stuff from the cooks and trying to make out it without getting our ears boxed.” Seeing this intrigued the other man, he let himself tell a few stories of his childhood, making sure to half listen to the discussion from the other room.

Dinner ended up being a pineapple chicken stir fry over rice, tart and flavorful and filling. Justin ate offhanded, using a marker on the taped together sheets of paper as he started marking out a timeline for the project. He’d used the same marker to jot his own estimates on the various packets, eyes sharp and focused on his task.

Tony was watching, but he was relaxed and seemed content in his choices, making a little bit of small talk with Cupcake as they all ate.

“Probation, huh. Both of you?”

“Yes. I was thinking about that actually, I’m not sure either of us can leave the state.” Cupcake nodded.
“I have lawyers, we’ll work it out. What were you in for? Or did you just get probation?”

“Oh, no, I actually went to jail. I embezzled the hell out of seven million dollars.”

Tony’s eyebrows went up. So did Loki’s. “I think I’m almost impressed.” Loki decided.

“It wasn’t even that I did it it’s that they never found it all. Stealing from thieves still makes you a thief but apparently makes the judge pretty lenient. Justin and I both were sent to some bullshit classes about responsible decision making and taking responsibility for our actions. That’s how we met.”

“So you joined forces to try to make better decisions.” Tony stated.

“Or worse ones but at least we wouldn’t be alone in our stupidity. It’s been nice.”

“Well, for the amount I’m sure this place will sell for you’ll probably be able to get a mansion on property in Detroit.”

“Am I hired? When did that happen?” Justin asked, looking up.

“Hush and finish your homework.”

“You’re not my dad.” But he went back to work.

It was late when Justin finished, leaning on the table with a weary but proud expression, contemplating his timeline. A few of the paper sheets had been replaced a few times, a few things lined out and moved but… “I’m done. That’s as close as I can crunch it without having actual real time estimates. I got it down by 18%.”

Tony contemplated him, then nodded. “Yeah that’s close enough.” He’d gotten a laptop bag out of
the car earlier and opened it now, getting the laptop out and holding it out to Justin.

“And what’s this?” He took it, studying it. “Wow, this feels strange, what kind of surface texturing do you have going on?”

“It’s a crosshatch pattern raised up with rubberized paint to make grip easy.” Loki explained.

“That’s one of the new hardened laptops my company is putting out. They’re not available yet, and that one’s special.” Tony said, watching Justin open it. “The usual bells and whistles of course, screen will detach to become a tablet, whole thing is water proof, oil proof, impact resistant. Solid state hard drives so it starts fast.”

“I’m seeing that. I already have a computer, you know.”

“Now you have a better one because that one’s got something special.” Tony sat back and waited.

He didn’t have long to wait, Justin was frowning at the screen within fifteen seconds of it starting. “What’s this glowing symbol in the corner of the screen?”

“Touch it and find out.”

Justin gave Tony a dubious look then doubletapped the screen, sitting back when the screen went to black with the symbol spinning in the center, then JARVIS ONLINE printed onto the screen. “Good evening, Mr. Hammer.”

“You’re the guy who presented Stark’s stuff at CES.” Justin said after a beat.

“Not a guy, I’m afraid. Just A Rather Very Intelligent System.”

“Jarvis is my not so silent partner in everything. He’s a construct. Helps me fly the suits, works with me in my labs, and manages my business. Since you’re going to take over the Bifrost project, I’ve decided to have him dedicate some cycles to helping you.” Tony explained. “The laptop has all the relevant hiring information, and he’ll connect you to my lawyers so we can alter your probation to let you move.”
“Have you been sitting on the fact that you have artificial intelligence? Stark, you selfish bastard.”

“I’m not quite artificial intelligence, sir.” Jarvis protested.

“Close enough.” Loki smiled. “Welcome to the company, Justin. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Yeah, because I’ll totally survive trashing Stark’s stuff twice.” He held out a hand and Tony stood, shaking it. “You haven’t told me what the pay and benefits are like.”

“I think you’ll find it sufficient. Documentation’s all on there.” He nodded at the laptop. “We’ll get out of your hair but trust me, we’ll be in touch.”
Chapter 11

Stark Industries announced the Bifrost plan on the first of February.

It was done in multiple parts, the first announcing a partnership with Wayne Enterprises with the goal of space travel and that they’d be working closely with Doctor Richards of the Fantastic Four. At that point, Tony stated that they were willing to have more companies come in on the project and that he’d be sending out invitations to a few companies to join and while he’s not going to call anyone out, Elon Musk, call me, you’re going to like this.

Once the press had sort of quieted down, the actual project was announced.

On the same day, in spite of it being February in Michigan, multiple billboards went up all over Detroit announcing the project with a website posted for careers prominently displayed. Justin Hammer had actually hand drawn the theoretical design for the website, not being a designer himself, and it was extremely straightforward, the opening page including a rendering of the site and a series of large buttons underneath to click asking the user to classify what kind of job they were looking for. It was overloaded with users inside six hours, or would have been if Jarvis hadn’t been keeping an eye on it and making sure it didn’t go offline.

It was huge and Tony was swamped for days, getting notices from other corporations wanting to pile on. Elon Musk of Tesla called within an hour of the press conference, and a bunch of other companies weren’t far behind. NASA also called the same day and was invited on board with zero prejudice because yes, this was a two part project.

The Bifrost could only be half of it. A point to point transport system would certainly let them put landers, and even people, on planets and NASA wanted in on that as fast as possible, immediately sending requests (can we put more landers on Mars? Can you put one on Europa? Can we use this device to send human explorers to Mars and bring them back?) and having to be told they had plenty of time to make ironclad plans because they’re looking at seven to eight years for construction on the inside and that their people being involved would be priceless. Because the other half of the project had to be spaceships, and once the bifrost was built they would be turning to that.

All in all, it looked like Tony was going to get his wish and that the company name was going to feature a space race in the history books, not arms deals.

So of course, someone had to rain viciously on the parade.
“We’ve got a problem.”

Loki paused in his practice with his staff, coming to a normal standing position and looking at Phil. Phil’s expression, or total lack thereof, told him a lot. “What’s going on?”

Phil walked into the practice space. He had a tablet under his arm and he tapped at the screen before turning the display so Loki could see it. Loki leaned in, then dropped the staff, because yeah, he only has to see a few seconds to realize that it’s cell phone camera footage of him in Stuttgart before the battle of New York.

And it’s showing his face.

“I thought Tony made all of that disappear.”

“So did we. Someone’s made it reappear and we can’t stop it. They’ve found footage from Stuttgart and New York and all of it implicates you, and they posted it all over the internet. They put it on torrents, 4Chan, Reddit, and Imgur. It’s repeatedly on Youtube on purpose because the original posters remarked in the comments that the government would spike the videos to protect you. They’re not wrong.”

Loki rubbed his face with one hand. “When did this hit?”

“Two hours ago.”

“So the world knows.”

“Yes. It’ll probably be on the evening news and frankly I don’t think there’s any way to spin this.”

Loki stood there for a moment, feeling panic and rage rise, fast and venomous, wanting to destroy whoever did this, whoever had put his life his happiness his friends at risk because it’s not just him, if they’re coming after him they’re coming after the Avengers by proxy. He doesn’t realize he’s starting to lose control until Phil takes two careful steps back because the floor is freezing solid around him, and he shakes off. “You said someone made this reappear. Considering the effort Tony made to
make sure none of this footage would get out, someone made a very purposeful effort to find it and reveal me. I have an enemy.”

“Or Stark does.” Phil agreed. “You’re involved with the bifrost project and you’re close to a lot of his current developments. Undermining you undermines him and frankly aims a blow at the Avengers.”

“I can’t allow that. Does everyone else know?”

“I’m about to call everyone to the common room to tell them. We need to decide how to respond and do so soon because the longer we let this go, the less likely we will have any control of the narrative.”

He considered the video still displaying in Phil’s hands. “Let me think about that while you gather everyone up. Do I have time to shower?”

“Go ahead. Common room in twenty.”

“Understood.”

Loki walked into the rumpus room to all of the Avengers present, everyone turning to look at him. The videos were on the main TV screen and Tony had half a dozen displays around him, standing in front of the TV, hands shuffling rapidfire in midair.

“Whoever did this is good but we’ve got to be better.” Tony was telling Jarvis. “We need to track the file transfers backwards until we find the original posts back then track those back.”

“Most of these posts are as anonymous as possible sir.” Jarvis replied.

“Nothing’s perfectly anonymous in the internet. Let’s find this asshole.”

“Loki.” Steve said, standing and walking over.
“Phil already told me.” He replied, shaking his head slightly. “I’m at your command, Captain.”

He was a bit surprised by that, but nodded once. “We’re not going to throw you to the wolves over this. You’re one of us. I think you’ve more than earned your place here.”

“Started to perhaps.”

“You have already been sentenced. You are serving your punishment. True enough that we have not told the people that, but what is the problem?” Thor asked. “We had every reason not to tell your secrets, it would have just hindered you.”

“We could try to explain but whether anyone would listen is another question. Even if we say he’s serving a work detail people will clamor for him to be locked up, guarantee it. Fox News is probably getting ready to bay for blood as we discuss this.” Phil replied.

“What’s your stance sir?” Clint asked.

“I don’t have one. There’s no room to spin. We can’t suck the footage back off the internet and if we tried it’d be an obvious cover up. We can’t really deny who the footage is of, either. The New York battle footage is shaky and none of it shows Loki’s face, just the armor and maybe we could claim it’s not unusual to Asgard but the Stuttgart footage? It’s obviously him.”

“May I?” Loki asked, and was rewarded with everyone looking at him. “These videos were put on the internet for everyone to see. I’d like to respond the same way. No official press conference. It would appear more honest, just because it’s less official.”

“He’s not wrong.” Tony said, still frantically working, chasing leads through the internet.

Phil gave Loki a long considering look, then nodded once. “What do you need?”

“An actual steady camera. I’ll do it here, don’t feel like you have to be totally quiet, some background chatter might sell it harder.” Loki looked at his watch. “I’ll film it in half an hour.” He saw the slightly lifted eyebrow on Phil. “Because that’s when I have to take my medicine.”
In the end it was a pretty simple setup. They found him an actual good video camera to use and set it up. Loki sat on a bar stool with his back to the bar, leaning back against it with a mug of tea.

“Yeah go ahead and start recording.” He saw the red light come on. “Just leave the footage pretty raw, if we edit someone will complain.”

“Including this sir?” Jarvis asked.

“Sure, why not.” He looked at his watch and nodded, taking the pill bottle out of his pocket and leaning forward to show the label to the camera. He gave it a moment then leaned back and opened it, taking one out and knocking it back with a drink of hot tea. “Ah Midgard and their very clever chemical bandages. It helps. Controls some of the violent urges and mood swings.” He told the camera. “So, you probably know why I’m here, but just in case…” He picked up Phil’s tablet and held it up, playing the Stuttgart footage. “The question I’m sure some people are asking, is that actually me? And yes. Of course it is.” He set it aside again. “The next question, which I’m sure will be angrily shouted, if I am tied to, responsible for, what happened in Stuttgart, what happened to SHIELD’s carrier, what happened in New York, why am I here? Why am I working alongside the Avengers? That’s the purpose of this video, to tell you why. To be frank, this is my choice. I have already been punished, more severely than you can really understand but I will try to bottom line it. Jarvis, can you bring up some hologram numbers in midair as I explain so we can keep track? I am Jotunn. I can live to be four thousand, easily.”

Loki gestured in midair, and 4000 highlighted there in bright blue numbers. “I’m currently approaching my first millennia. For the purpose of this conversation the exact does not matter, all you really need to know is, I’m one quarter through my lifespan. Now Midgardians, if they’re lucky, live to be one hundred.” 1000 showed below the 4000, with 100 next to it. “So, one quarter of one of your lifespans is 25. Yes, I’m your equivalent of 25. Or I was. Here’s where the punishment comes into place.”

He looked at the camera. “I’m still Jotunn, but my lifespan has been drastically reduced by Odin the Allfather. I am now living a Midgardian lifespan. I have seventy-five years left. Now you’re going to say so what? He’s still free, he’s living seventy five years free. Well, that’s your perception. Now let me explain mine. Previously, I had three thousand years. Now, I have seventy-five. And in that seventy-five I will age unto antiquity. My family, not under the hindrance I am, has to watch me grow old weak and die like a candle flickering in the wind.”

He heard Thor say something in the home tongue, pained, and paid it no mind. He knows it’s the first time he’s verbally laid out his punishment like this. “Seventy-five years is point zero two five
percent of my former life span.” That number came up, smashing the other numbers, hanging in front of Loki. “To draw a comparison, point zero two five percent of seventy-five years is…”

The math popped up. “6.84 days, sir.”

Loki looked at the math (backwards to him), then looked at the camera, sitting back to lean on the bar and picking his tea back up. “That’s the magnitude of my sentence. I live my entire life, from health and prime to decrepit old age, in less than one of your weeks. Is that sentence enough for the acts I committed while in the middle of a psychological crisis? Because I assure you, the medicine is not for show.” He looked at the camera from under his brows and let a bit of a vicious unbalanced grin show. “There’s quite a bit wrong with me, but, I’m in treatment.”

He stood, shrugging. “I’m sure that SHIELD can provide documentation for what I’ve said and if you’re not willing to believe them, I’ll request documentation from Asgard. Also to be considered is the following. Yes, this footage was purposefully buried. Someone released it. To whomever that is? Enjoy your very temporary anonymity. And that’s it.” He made a throat cut gesture and the camera shut off.

“Is that seriously the constraints of your sentence?” Clint wanted to know.

Loki gave him a look. “Unless Odin decides to change something, yes.”

“Father is actually willing to, but he’s under the impression Loki prefers it here.” Thor said, sounding pained.

“I do. Any protests to the content of my video, Phil?”

“No, though I’m not sure if it will help or hinder.” He admitted.

“Well, let’s put it on the internet and find out.”

It was a shitstorm, of course.
Loki ended up sitting in the rumpus room a lot with the main TV screen split between different news feeds. Tony just kept telling him it would rot his brain because most of the news people were just paid shills and not necessarily representative of the actual opinion of the public. He watched anyway.

SHIELD sent all of their documentation out as necessary including a massive scanned copy of some scroll from Odin himself. Loki mostly found that funny as hell.

“We have computers and he sends a scroll.” Loki mused, reading it. “Well this paints me in a many colored light doesn’t it?”

“They wanted an official transcript of your criminal record, father gave it.” Thor replied, sitting down next to Loki. “I think he chose a scroll mostly to amuse himself.”

“He does find himself amusing.”

“Loki.”

“You disagree?”

Thor snorted. “No, I agree entirely, keep reading.”

He did. “Oh he just had to include the mess with the builder didn’t he?”

“Keep reading.”

“Oh he does think he’s funny.”

“Father thinks he’s hilarious. Privately. I suspect.”

“I do enjoy that his take on the mess with Jotunheim is yes, I tried to blow up a planet, but he’s sealed entire realms off so it’s hardly unusual behavior to the royalty of Asgard. Did he forgive me
when I wasn’t looking?”

“He let you light a celebratory bonfire.”

“Touché.” He rolled the scroll back up and passed it to Thor. “How did Phil take it when you handed him that?”

“I wasn’t sure what I was expecting.” Phil replied from the kitchen area of the Rumpus Room.

“Will you please stop doing that?”

“No. Your lack of observation is not my problem.”

“That man has feet like a cat.” Thor murmured to Loki. “Sif misses him.”

“Good for her. Or him. Both.” Loki looked back to the news on the TV, all silenced with subtitles running.

“You’re going to rot your brain.” Phil walked over, eating granola mix.

“I am? Look what you’re eating.” He replied without missing a beat. “You don’t seem concerned about all of this.”

“I’m not. My stance hasn’t changed. You’re useful and loyal by way of who you’re fucking, which isn’t my favorite way to guarantee loyalty because people are goddamn stupid about love, but I’m willing to wager it’ll keep you from trying to participate in anything more questionable than whatever Tony’s up to on any given day.”

Thor burst into laughter while Loki just stared blinking at Phil for several seconds before getting his thoughts together enough to reply. “Very occasionally you provide disturbing insight to your decision making processes and honestly, I usually find I could have done without being enlightened.”
Phil snorted and wandered off toward the elevator. “Don’t plot Bill O’Reilly’s murder, Clint’s already beat you to it.”

“Which one is he?”

“Fox News. Loud and angry.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down for Fox News!” Loki informed him but the elevator had already shut.

“I am glad he is here. He is…” Thor considered, looking for a word.

“I’d say leveling but I am fairly certain his world is permanently slant, much like the truths he clings to.”

“A poetry reference?” He only seemed more delighted.

“Jarvis let me look at your reading list. And youtube viewing list. How many hours have you spent watching slam poetry?”

“As many as you’ve spent watching horse and wolf videos I assume.” He saw Loki’s look and clapped his shoulder once before returning to watching the news with Loki.

“We found the source of the video uploads.” Tony said after shouldering into Phil’s office, hair frazzled and on the bad end of sleep deprivation.

Phil looked up. “Can it wait until after you’ve slept twelve hours?”

“It’s Aldrich Killian.”

He sat back, watching Tony collapse into a chair across from him. “First, I’m impressed. Second, do
“You have proof of that?”

“Yeah but all of it’s pretty ill-gotten. There’s not a security system on the planet that Jarvis and I can’t break into eventually and we did a lot of that tracking those videos back. They covered their tracks well.” Phil’s office used to be Tony’s so its holograph enabled and a picture of the globe popped up, covered in colored lines. “Those videos were sent through as many second and third parties as possible to help hide them but everything has a source.”

“But you know it goes back to Killian.”

“I’ve emailed you the full run down. Files originated from servers owned by his company before they were put into various anonymous online storage locations. How he got those files? I don’t know. I did my damnedest to make them disappear.”

“I know you did. Killian’s been on our radar for a while. He’s got something very strange going on with injured veterans. Normally I say any attempt to help injured veterans is a good one, but I’ve been somewhat severely turned off of human experimentation as of late.”

“He was here a while ago, had a meeting with Pepper hoping for a business partnership. I’ll have Jarvis give you the transcript; he had some kind of live display of his own brain.” Tony rubbed his eyes.

“You think this is payback for the business deal being rejected?”

“I don’t know why, he knew we don’t deal with that kind of biotech. He’s better off talking to Oscorp, they do stuff like that, I’m into hardware not wetware unless you count my prosthetics division.” Tony waved his hands. “He doesn’t like me very much is the point and Loki apparently hates him.”

Phil quirked an eyebrow. “Really.”

“Yeah, day after New Year’s he remarked on Killian being at the party he attended for you guys. He thinks Killian is an utter skeeze.”

“He’s not wrong. We’ll look into it. We’ve been looking for an excuse to, anyway. He’s been up to some things in LA and Malibu, interestingly enough. If you’d still been on that coast we might have
“Nah. Sold that house. Happy’s going out there next week though to oversee some of my car collection being moved, he’d probably love to help your guys out.”

“I’ll take it under advisement. Go to bed, Tony.”

He shoved himself to his feet. “Excellent idea. Let me know if you find anything damning on Killian.”

“We already have, it’s just pinning it on him.”

“Have you made sure his taxes are paid?”

“We did. They are.” He made a shooing gesture, and Tony went.

“Sir, a Clark Kent is calling for you.” JARVIS announced, popping into the living room.

Tony was half awake on the couch. He’d slept ten hours and honestly wasn’t sure when he transitioned from the bed to the couch or where he’d acquired coffee. “Uh, Kent. Wayne’s friend?”

“Yes, sir.”

Somewhere in the fog of Tony’s mind, he knew there was a reason for this call, but honestly he just couldn’t be bothered to try to remember. “Go ahead and patch him through.”

“Put the coffee down and go back to bed.” Loki advised from the kitchen.

“Mr. Stark?” Kent’s voice asked on the overhead.
“Yeah, that’s me. Loki’s here too.”

“That’s convenient. I was wondering if in light of what came out on the news yesterday, you two would still be interested in doing that interview? I’ve done some looking into the mental health of soldiers including traumatic brain injury, and I think discussing mental health and recognized superheroes would be a fantastic lead in.”

“I’m still up for it. Loki?”

“Of course.” Loki wandered out of the kitchen munching on a bowl of muesli. “When would you want to do this, Mr. Kent?”

“Well, I have plane tickets to New York for this Friday, returning Tuesday, does any time in that span work for you?”

“Saturday afternoon.” Tony decided. “JARVIS, mark that on my schedule will you?”

“Done sir.”

“I’m not going to claim this is going to be happy fun times.” He warned. “Loki is a little used to talking about this. I’m not.”

“These are sensitive subjects, if you need to stop, we stop and say as such in the finished product.” Clark replied. “Can I bring a photographer?”

“I don’t see why not.” Loki said, sitting by Tony and feeding him a spoonful of his breakfast.

“Mmph.” Tony swallowed roughly and tried to remember when he last ate cereal with milk. “I also don’t see why, I mean, it’s an interview right? Pretty low action.”

“A few candid photos during the interview might underscore how serious this topic is.”
“Alright, fine, but they don’t get to wander off. See you Saturday.”

“Should I just ask reception to be allowed up?”

“When you come into the lobby ask for JARVIS, he’ll steer you right.”

“Alright, thank you for this opportunity.” And the call disconnected quietly.

“You were up far too long. Did you find what you were looking for?” Loki gave him another spoonful between his own bites.

“Yeah. Looks like Killian was the source of the videos.”

He blinked once. “Interesting.”

“I was honestly expecting more of a response. You seem to hate the guy.”

He considered. “I recognize the type because I nearly was the type.”

“Ohh. I hate it when you do that.”

He sat back and ate his cereal. “You hating it doesn’t make it less true. Menace clings to that man, and he’s far too willing to get close to Pepper.”

“We don’t have anything on him we can use right now, I broke some computer security laws getting that information. I’ve already told Coulson so he’s going to do some digging.”

“If there’s something to be found, he’ll find it I’m sure.”

“What I don’t get is, why would he dig at you?”
“When he was here I told him to stay away, in not so many words.” Loki tapped his bowl with his spoon. “Perhaps he took it more personally than I thought, or perhaps he’s trying to get to you through me. What’s the history there?”

“I never knew the guy really. Met him briefly in an elevator during a New Year’s party, he wanted to talk about a project of his but I was more interested in banging a hot chick who had a hot science project.”

He chuckled. “That sounds like old you.”

“Her project was really cool, surprised we haven’t heard more about her work.” He rubbed his face. “Maybe I should go back to bed.”

“I’ll cover the lab and talk to Phil if it comes up. Shoo. You’re barely vertical.”

Tony scoffed and collapsed sideways in a ragdoll sprawl, taking up Loki’s lap and neatly preventing him from going to the lab for a few hours.

“I mean really? It just seems kind of lame.” Tony studied the whiteboard he’d been given then looked at the photographer skeptically. “It’s like putting a simple label on the issue when nothing about this is simple at all.”

“The point is you’re labeling something not spoken about. Admitting to the issue, really.” Clark replied. “That’s what this whole thing is about. Mental health care is a huge problem in this country since it was gutted years ago, and it’s an even bigger problem for our soldiers. We’ve lost more to suicide than combat deaths. Something is wrong. This might be the equivalent of shouting ‘you are not alone’ into a void but maybe we’ll get the right lights on the situation and get some change started.”

“If the most annoying thing you have to do today is hold a white board then today will be a decent day.” Loki told him, though he hadn’t written anything on his yet, tapping the marker on the surface.

“I feel like you’re ahead of me on this. I’ve never gotten help.” Tony admitted.
“I probably never would have if Fury hadn’t made me. Still I cannot argue the results. I like my therapist and the medicine helps.” Loki murmured, writing his name at the top of the board in Norse runes then starting to write before pausing. “I need a larger board or a finer tipped marker, unless you’re fine with me just using the first word of the disorder name, which might be enough?”

“Try that and let’s see if it works, if not I think I have a larger board.” The photographer was looking to see if he did (he had an extra one of the same size at least) and looked up when Loki had wiped the board clean and rewrote. Loki actually had quite good penmanship, though he always had to focus on writing in English because Allspeak was more spoken than written and the alphabet of Asgard didn’t exactly match to Latin. As a result, the runes of his name looked jagged, and the names of his disorders flowed smoothly.

“Showoff.” Tony said around the cap of his pen. “My goddamn doctor scribbles, why can’t I type this?” He held up his own board, which had his first name written in a jot then PTSD.

“Because your writing shows your personality perfectly.” Loki deadpanned, looking at it.

Tony looked at his board then looked at Loki. “Now wait just a damn minute.”

The elevator opened and Steve stormed out, still in his winter exercise gear, walking by them without a glance and going to the bar. The cameraman pivoted on heel and lifted his camera without missing a beat. Clark was sitting at a table with the work station Tony had given him for Christmas and shuffled the display to a new page, starting to make notes. Steve, meanwhile, had dug out a bottle and glass, pouring himself three fingers of booze and setting the bottle down with a thump on the bar before picking up the glass and knocking the whole thing back in a motion.

“I’m not one to pry when someone angrily goes for alcohol but what brought that on?” Tony asked after a few seconds of shocked silence.

Steve looked at them, not surprised by their presence but finally acknowledging them. “Phil and I just had to throw some people out of the lobby of your building.”

“I trust your judgement. We get so many tourists through there people seem to forget it’s a privately owned building. Anyone special?”

“Special’s a word for it. They said they were representatives from the National Organization for Marriage.”
“Phil didn’t kill them did he?”

“No, but he was kind enough to tell me what their organization does before they got more than a few words out.”

“Ah. Yes, I can see where you’d be annoyed. Thank you for kicking them out, Stark Industries is LGBT friendly or I’d be even more of a raging hypocrite.”

Loki looked between them, sighed, and looked at the ceiling. “Jarvis, can you…” He made a gesture in front of him and a holo screen popped up with the needed information, and he set about skimming it.

Steve tapped a finger on his empty glass thoughtfully, looking at the photographer (who had since lowered the camera) and Clark Kent. “What brings you back, Mr. Kent? Good as it is to see you, I hadn’t been told you were dropping back by.”

“I’m writing an article regarding soldiers and mental health, they’ve agreed to talk to me about mental health and superheroes.” Clark replied, a little bemused by this exchange.

He set his glass down on the bar with a gentle click. “Do you have a third board?”

“Uh, yeah, I do…” The photographer produced it and a marker.

Steve walked over and took it, considering it for a moment before taking the cap off the marker and writing silently. Afterwards he capped the marker and flipped the board, showing ‘Steve – PTSD & Depression.’ “Can I join you?”

“Of course you can.” Loki replied, dismissing the screen and neatly filling in everyone else’s surprised quiet. “I’m sure Clark can deal with having a third person in his interview.”

“Of course.” Clark agreed.
“I had no idea, man.” Tony told Steve, looking up at him.

“You didn’t tell me about your PTSD either.”

“I’d protest about it being my dirty laundry always hanging out but I nearly made a career out of that on Asgard.” Loki rolled his eyes. “Fine, we’re brothers in bad brains. Let’s get this done before we ruin all three of our days simultaneously.”

It was a few hours later that it was over, and it left all three of them sitting numb in a row on the couch, feeling somewhat wrung out.

“That was the most weirdly intimate nonsexual thing I’ve ever gone through or talked about. Sorry Steve.” Tony said after silence had reigned for quite some time.

“Felt good to talk about it, actually.” He’d gotten them all bottles of water and took a drink of his.

Loki was huddled on the end of the couch and said nothing, though he managed not to flinch when Tony touched his shoulder. “Hey. Talk to us. Do you want me to call your therapist?” Tony asked quietly.

“No, but there’s a few things I might talk to her about next time.”

He nodded and shifted to wrap his arms around Loki, smiling when Loki leaned into him.

The elevator opened and Phil walked in, in a suit and the tablet half of his laptop under his arm. “JARVIS asked me to wait a while, have I waited long enough or shall I come back later?”

“If you don’t mind us maintaining position I think we can handle it.” Steve replied after a moment of consideration.

“Fair enough.” He walked over. “I don’t think you’ve been told, Captain. As near as Stark, and now our own people, can ascertain, Aldrich Killian of Advanced Idea Mechanics was behind the release
of the videos of Loki. Unfortunately that doesn’t mean he’s guilty of anything but the timing and motive is suspicious.”

“I agree entirely.”

“He doesn’t seem like one of those information must be free types.” Tony nodded. “You make some progress?”

“We’ve been looking into what he’s doing, that program with veterans. At the moment it looks like there’s no way we’ll be able to get one of our own people into his program so we’re stuck with cop work.” He pulled the tablet around. “The name Maya Hansen mean anything to you?”

He blinked. “Yeah, I remember her. She had an interesting project, rapid cell repair and regeneration. Very cool concept but in practice she was blowing up house plants.”

“She’s working for him. And it’s interesting you mention the house plants, actually.” Phil quirked a brow at something on his screen. “I’m going to be stepping out of the tower for a while. I’m taking an investigative team out to LA to look into what he’s doing out there.”

“Happy is supposed to go out there soon and shuffle my car collection around. Why don’t you all hitch a ride on one of my jets?” Tony offered. “He loves your spy shit, he’d love to help.”

“Well I doubt he can act his way out of a wet paper bag but a luxury plane ride might convince me to let his boyhood dream come true.” He seemed genuinely amused. “It should be pretty low threat, we’re just going to look at his office there and see if we can speak to a few vets he’s been working with. I’m currently not anticipating any sort of confrontation.”

“Fantastic. JARVIS, help set this man and his people up with a plane and let Happy know the change of plans.”

“Certainly sir.”

“While I’m gone I’d like you to look into the Ten Rings.”
“Giving us homework?” Loki wanted to know.

“Ten Rings. The Mandarin?” Steve wanted to know.

“We’ve all seen the news.” Tony told him.

“They’re ramping up, and frankly their videos seem pretty goddamn pro. They’re too Hollywood, if you catch my drift. Watch some of the Mandarin’s propaganda together and argue about it. I have a personal theory that some if not all of the people involved are Western educated. Voice analysis seems to back me up but I want your opinions on it.”

“Yeah, sure. If he’s putting videos online we may be able to follow them back. You never know.”

“Watch for their next vid and chase that one back so you have a fresh trail.” Phil advised. “Thank you for the use of one of your planes, Mr. Stark. And thank you all for what you did. I’ve had to put a few fellow agents into involuntary psych hold before. Any improvement over that would be appreciated.”

Tony wove him off, and Phil strolled back out.

Two days later, an explosion all but leveled the entrance of Grauman’s Chinese Theater. Happy Hogan was among the injured. Two SHIELD agents in plainclothes didn’t survive.
“This is one hundred percent my fault.”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s fair sir.” Steve replied, frowning at Phil through the screen.

“No, it is.” Phil replied, shaking his head slightly. “I severely underestimated the situation and in the process put our agents as well as civilians in harm’s way. Now not only has the situation escalated, there’s two families that I need to tell that their family member is not coming home.”

“Hey, Agent, consider this as conference call.” Tony’s voice announced, his video feed popping in next to Phil’s.

“Did you just suborn a secure line?” Phil wanted to know.

“Yeah, secure, sure. Happy is stable. I might have yelled at some news crews. I looked at the blast site and I cannot find any residue of any standard explosive especially something powerful enough to have that big of a blast radius and still be on a human body. We’re dealing with something else.”

Phil rubbed his eyes. “Stark, we lost people, this is officially a SHIELD matter.”

“I nearly lost someone. You’ll have to beat me to them.”

“Stars above, both of you are children.” Loki said sharply and was awarded with silence. “Captain?”

“Agent Coulson, let me take the folded flags to the families.” Steve said evenly.

“… That isn’t your responsibility, Captain.”

“It can be and you need to focus on who did this. Tony? Work with Coulson not against him you’re not competing to see who can punch a bad guy first.”

“This from a guy who made a living punching Hitler on stage.” Tony scoffed. “Loki I need you in the lab, I have a scan of the scene and I need your brain on the data. Agent, once we can draw any conclusions, you’ll know.”

“Is it safe to assume AIM and Killian is behind this?” Loki wanted to know.

“Tentatively yes.” Phil said after a beat. “Their people were on site as this happened. I don’t believe in coincidence. It’s not enough to put anyone in cuffs, though.”

“Where’s everyone going to be?” Steve wanted to know.

“I’m coming back to New York. Happy’s in the hospital here, as high security as I can manage, he’ll be brought to New York once he’s healed enough.” Tony replied.

“I’m staying here until we get a definite location to move to.” Coulson looked dissatisfied to say the least.

“We’re all on this sir, they don’t stand a chance. Send me that information so I can visit those families.”

“I will, Captain.”
“You may have yelled at some news crews, what were you honestly thinking?” Loki wanted to know, standing in the lab’s main floor surrounded by holograph wreckage and bodies, a screen playing Tony shouting at the press.

“They know who I am and they know where I live, if they’re going to make it personal they need to come at me.” Tony replied, already in flight to New York.

“Do you really think anyone would be stupid enough to attack this building?”

“It’d make my life easy if they did. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Loki tutted, turning in a slow circle and studying the scene. “Whatever caused this destruction was definitely on someone’s person. While there’s plenty of explosives that can do this kind of damage, carrying them on a human is another matter, especially in a way that isn’t immediately noticeable.”

“Something a bit more unusual about this. It was hot enough it was caught on satellite.”

“You’re kidding me, JARVIS?” He watched the data come up. “Five thousand degrees. Interesting.”

“Isn’t it? Not a lot of explosives hit that kind of temperature let alone long enough for something in orbit to catch it. And it gets better. This isn’t the first spike of that level we’ve seen. It’s been written off as errors and noise, but now…”

“Working on it.” Loki looked up as Pepper walked into the lab, looking put together but still red eyed.

“He’s alive, right?”

“Happy is stable for now.” Tony’s voice confirmed. “I’m on the way back.”

“What were you thinking? Demanding they attack here, Tony we have civilian employees!”

“JARVIS can control any of the armor suits, plus he has a lot of guns, plus we have escape tunnels that link to the subway, plus we’re the Avengers.” Tony replied.

Pepper put her face in her hands. Loki wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in, sorting data with the other. “I’ve got an interesting hit. One of these previous temperature spikes came alongside what’s thought to be a suicide bombing.”

“Where?”

“Tennessee. Sending you the data.”

“Right. Guys I’m rerouting. I’m looking into this on the way home. Loki? Take care of Pepper for me.”

“Of course. Stay safe. Five thousand degrees is hot even for Iron Man armor.” He watched the call close, then looked at Pepper. “What do you remember about Killian’s visit?”

She blinked. “What?”
“He might be tied to this.” He gestured around at the holograph wreckage and she looked around and startled, realizing that they were standing in a display of a bombing aftermath. “What did he tell you about his projects?”

“At about twenty four hours in, here’s what we know.” Thanks to Tony’s holograph tech, Phil was standing in the rumpus room, in spite of actually still being in California, tablet in hand. “Maya Hansen is working for Aldrich Killian. Hansen was previously working on a project that focused on increasing the body’s regenerative capabilities. From what Miss Potts has said, AIM might still be working on the project. Talk to me about the Ten Rings.”

“We’ve looked into the Mandarin sir, and everyone agrees. He’s really, really Hollywood. There is a group called the Ten Rings active overseas but if you actually dig into their forums…” Clint said, sitting on the back of one of the couches.

“They’re claiming no actual ties to any bombings in the United States.” Natasha finished. “Not that they’re complaining about bombings happening here, but they’re not directly taking credit. Also they put out only a handful of videos before the bombings started happening here, and the style and production value changed drastically when it did start.”

“I’ve mapped out all the bombings and they all seem to correspond to the heat spikes, like at the Chinese Theater.” Loki said. “Tony, you on the line?”

“I last spoke to Maya Hansen in 1999 on New Year’s.” Tony’s voice replied, as he and the armor were in Tennessee. “At that point she was working with plants. Happy damaged her fern and it about blew a hole in the hotel room.”

“It cannot be this simple.” Clint said after a beat.

“You’re right, it isn’t. AIM has gotten a lot of funding from a lot of places and people. One of those people is the Vice President.” Phil replied. “Though a foundation, of course.”

“Shit.”

“Sir, I have an additional concern.” JARVIS announced. “War Machine is not responding.”


“Investigating a Ten Rings related lead overseas, sir, and has since gone silent.”

“Find the armor, JARVIS.”

“Already searching, sir.”

“Interesting.” Phil said after a beat.

“Not cool, Agent.” Tony flared.

“No, he’s right; that is interesting.” Loki said after a beat. “So we’re all agreeing that there is likely a link between the Ten Rings operating in the States, and AIM, correct?”

“I’m willing to agree with that assessment.” Natasha said.
“There’s too many coincidences.” Clint agreed. “So they’ve got a healy thing, right, but the healy thing has a side order of people exploding.”

“Kind of against the point of the project.” Pepper observed. “You all realize that if you’re correct, that means that there’s a fake terrorist organization being used to cover up human experimentation failures.”

“Sadly, it wouldn’t be the worst abuse of human experimentation I’ve even seen this year.” Phil reflected.

“It would explain why some of the explosion sites make no sense as targets. Yes, terrorism is meant to scare people but honestly, who attacks Tennessee?” Tony wanted to know.

“Well, the Union, about a century and a half ago.” Clint half smiled.

“Pedant.”

“We’re off the track gentlemen. Why would AIM want the War Machine armor?” Loki interrupted.

“That is a question I don’t want to answer.” Tony said after a long silence.

“I don’t have a good answer either.” Phil said after an equal pause. “I can’t make that fit into this, yet. But I refuse to think that Colonel Rhodes going silent after looking into a Ten Rings issue doesn’t somehow fit with this.”

“Justin Hammer did some work on War Machine, I think his software’s still running on it and he works for me now. JARVIS, call him, he might be able to help us find Rhodey.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

“I’m going to look further into the Vice President’s connection. Anything happens, let me know. I’ll send a file to the Captain’s phone to keep him apprised of the situation.” Phil’s holograph disappeared.

“This is a mess.” Bruce observed, finally speaking up from his position on the couch. “But I admit, I’m interested in this healing mechanism that AIM is working with.”

“Most of the soldiers they’re recruiting are amputees. Might be they’re working on a way to regenerate limbs. I guess we should be glad they’re not trying to use Wolverine or Deadpool for this.” Clint stood up.

“People have tried to use Deadpool for that, Deadpool’s healing factor isn’t inherent. The cancer is.” Natasha replied, prompting Clint to hum a sad trombone noise.

“I don’t get the fake terrorism angle. I mean it’s as good a way as any to cover up randomly exploding people but why not just keep them away from public areas until you’re certain?” Bruce asked.

Loki was still shuffling information. “It’s a good question. Considering Killian, I’d solidly bet it’s because he doesn’t care, and the Ten Rings thing is part of a larger plan. If he’s working with the Vice President, that’s not a good sign. Nothing good comes from a man like Killian trying to curry political favors.”

“Nothing good can come from your grudge match with Killian either.” Natasha observed.
“I can’t argue that.”

“It is a bit of an overreaction to him hitting on me.” Pepper was almost amused.

“Nonsense my dear. Him flirting with you just means he has excellent taste. It was the fact that he had an angle for flirting with you that I took most offense to.”

“Justin Hammer is sending everything he has regarding War Machine.” JARVIS announced. “He notes that it’s not everything, but he lost the rights to some of it when he was removed from his former position. The armor is not currently broadcasting signal so I am focusing on locating the related arc reactor.”

“That is really, really not good.” Bruce observed. “Want my help, JARVIS? It might not be all that different than looking for Loki.” He gave Loki an apologetic look, Loki waved it off.

“Certainly sir. And while I hate to further complicate matters, a woman identifying herself as Maya Hansen is currently in the lobby of the building. I have made the decision to not allow her past the lobby and security is keeping an eye on her.”

Everyone paused and Loki looked up from his work. “That’s interesting. Clint?”

“Already calling Phil.” Clint replied, digging out his phone.

“I don’t like that timing at all.” Pepper was frowning.

“Neither do I.” Loki tossed his holograph screens to Bruce then disappeared, teleporting down to their apartment then returning in his jacket with his staff on his back. “Let’s go speak to her, because aren’t you just dying to know what she wants?”

“Why are you in charge anyway?” Clint wanted to know, phone to his ear.

“Everyone knows that when the parents are away the oldest sibling is in charge and I only have, oh, seven hundred years on most of you.” Loki was already walking toward the elevator. Natasha snorted.

“The sad part is that logic makes perfect sense.” Pepper reflected as they got on the elevator.

“If we weren’t in a mission status you’d be in charge dear.” He kissed the top of her head. “It is occurring to me that we’re Tony’s two current lovers, going downstairs to meet a previous lover.”

“That happens more often than we’d both like to admit. So let’s just try to be cordial.”

“I can’t even call him the adventurous one.” Pepper smiled a bit as they got off the elevator. The lobby was relatively deserted except for a woman standing by one of the benches fiddling with her phone. “Hm, I rather like the reporter better.”

“Terrible. You’re terrible.” She told him as they walked over, her heels clicking. “Maya Hansen?”

“Hi? Oh you’re Pepper Potts! Is Tony home?”

She paused. “Tell me there’s not a twelve year old waiting in a car somewhere.”

“He’s thirteen.” She waited just long enough for Pepper to flinch then kept going. “No, I’m hoping for Tony’s help actually.”

Loki about choked on his own spit then laughed softly.
“So am I scary enough he has to send an Avenger to shove me off?” She glanced at Loki.

“No. He’s not here. He’s doing some follow up investigation regarding the Chinese theater explosion.”

She sighed and glanced at her phone before shoving it in her jacket. “Any idea when he’ll be back?”

“No.” Loki replied simply. “We’d rather like to talk to you though. Did you ever iron out the bugs in your healy thing?”

She stared at him then looked at Pepper. “Wow. He’s up there on the hot versus crazy scale isn’t he?”

“You have no idea.” Pepper deadpanned. Loki was too busy laughing again to argue the assessment and he rather agreed anyway. “He’s not the only one curious for an answer to that question.”

“Agent Coulson would like an answer to that question as well and has asked for us to hold her here. Agent Romanov was going to come down with her badge to make it official, however...” JARVIS said on the overhead as the lights in the building shifted to orange. “Attention all staff, we are officially in alert. Credible threat less than one minute out. Building window shutters are being activated, please move to the safe rooms near the interior of the building.”

“That’s not a drill.” Loki looked at Pepper.

“No it isn’t.” She agreed. “JARVIS?”

“There’s some rather stiff legal limits on what aircraft can fly between buildings in this city, Miss Potts, and generally speaking, armed attack helicopters are not among them. They are not responding my requests for an explanation. I have already taken the liberty of alerting the local police and I am alerting the other local heroes that we have a threat inbound.”

Maya’s eyes widened. “We need to get out of here right now.”

“Really, why? We’re safer here than anywhere else, even under siege.” Loki wanted to know, and then looked past her. “Or it might be that you know something. JARVIS there’s also a ground threat; we need the lobby locked down.”

“No, seriously, we need to go.” Maya grabbed for Pepper, trying to pull her toward the front door. Loki lunged, intending to grab them both and teleport them into the elevator (which was already open), and just registered Maya grabbing into her bag before something sharp dug into his neck.

It would have been funny if he wasn’t mortal. It still was kind of funny, he reflected as he staggered and went down, hearing Maya saying “Oh god it worked I can’t believe it worked!” and Pepper shouting his name as gunfire chattered and glass broke, then the world went blurry and dark.

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“Maya Hansen is hostile. Loki is compromised.” JARVIS announced.

“I am a little busy at the moment.” Clint replied tightly, standing on the balcony and letting loose arrows at one of the choppers that had opened fire on the building. “But it seems to me we fell for one hell of a distraction. Natasha?”
“In the lobby, they’re already gone. Their guys tagged a few of Stark’s security, injuries no deaths.” She reported.

“These choppers are a bigger danger to the people below than this building. I’ve put down some of the people in them but…” He paused as Spiderman landed next to him. “Those things are a death blender to you kid.”

“They’re only firing from the front. It’s cool.” And he was gone.

“Spiderman’s in the field. Where the hell is Stark?”

“Here I’m here oh fuck are you kidding me about Loki?” A flash of light zipped by then again as Tony hit every thruster he could, trying to slow down from more than breaking the sound barrier.

“No. Loki and Pepper were both taken.” Natasha reported, prompting several moments of dead silence from Tony as the Iron Man suit hovered in midair.

That was just long enough for the helicopters to notice him and turn in midair before both Tony’s hands came up and the various other weapons on the suit opened up at the same time. “Spiderman? Clear what’s under us.” That’s all the warning he gave before opening fire.

With Spiderman making sure there was no one left standing in the damage cone (swinging by and taking a few cops with him then webbing a perimeter in the space of a few seconds), Clint opened fire as well and the choppers fell moments after the ground was clear. Afterward Tony flew by, grabbed Clint by the back of his suit and took him with him down to the ground floor to survey the wreckage.

“Iron Man.” Coulson’s voice came onto the radio.

“I’ve got one family member in the hospital now and my two loved ones off the map you better talk fucking fast, Agent.”

“Whoa. Hold up.” Barton put a hand up, watching the burning wreckage as Spiderman landed next to them. “Something is moving in here.”

“No way, I put enough ordinance in those to almost powderize them.” Tony looked just in time to see the twisted remains of a chopper door fly away and a human figure stand. “Agent? My video feed, now.”

“Understood, bringing it up.” Phil was actually in a quinjet, which was not his preferred station for managing this much data but with his laptop and a tablet as well as his SHIELD radio he was at least able to keep tabs on the situation. “This rather explains some intel we’ve got.”

“Intel? I thought we were sharing!” Tony squawked indignantly, hands up again as the burning figure seemed to pop various bones back into place then turn to look at them. “Wait. This is extremis. Holy shit Maya managed to cross from plants to people.”

“I feel like we shouldn’t be encouraging that kind of experimentation.” Spiderman said. “What do we do about this?”

“You might want to share that intel, Coulson.” Barton said, bow raised. “Because he looks pissed.”

“Explosives, chest, now, before he finishes recovering.” Coulson replied and was rewarded with Clint and Tony opening fire again, Clint leading with explosive arrows and Tony loading the cutting laser and using it instead.
It still felt like it too far too long to put the figure down.

Loki’s done a fine variety of mind altering substances in his life, and would qualify that he’s almost entirely dependent on one of the prescription variety at the moment. Might be for the remainder of his life, actually, but it makes sure he’s not a threat to what he loves. The point is he recognizes the slow, syrupy feeling in his bones as he wakes up, and keeps himself still, eyes shut as he tries to assess his situation. His jacket is gone and likely his staff by extension, as well as his shirt and his shoes (really?) and there’s cuffs locked on his wrists, though they’re not connected together. He’s lying on a hard surface, likely a floor, and he can feel the footsteps of people walking a few feet away.

He could lambast himself for his own stupidity but honestly that’s just not his style so he opens his eyes and pushes himself to a sitting position in one motion, staying on the floor for the moment. He’s in a small high tech box (two meters by two meters by two meters, if he’s to judge, which means it’s just small enough he’ll have to stoop if he stands). The cuffs aren’t connected to each other but they are connected to heavy ring attached to the floor. The box itself is see-through except at the edges, and Aldrich Killian is sitting backwards on a chair just outside, lifting an eyebrow at him.

He settled on lifting one back, studying the restraints on his wrists. Nothing fancy, though the cage itself is clearly technical, so he put a hand on the ring and half shut his eyes as he froze it solid. He gave a solid jerk as he stood and the ring shattered, leaving him with cuffs with a length of chain on each one. One thing at a time. “I wasn’t intending to be in your company, Mr. Killian. Where is Pepper?”

“You know she’s been asking about you too? Funny thing that.” Aldrich clearly didn’t actually find that funny.

Loki sneered and looked past him, sweeping the room with his eyes as he worked on freezing the cuffs off. Old looking building besides the recently added tech, he noted, and while there’s armed guards they look like nothing special and he has easy line of sight so he teleports, only to slam into the of the walls of the cage, get shocked and bounced back.

Killian burst into laughter and applauded. “You have no idea who I had to make a deal with to get my hands on that tech on short notice. That is amazing.” He stood, straightening up. “It was really handy of you to broadcast your weaknesses to the internet too. Showed that prescription label bold and clear. It was just a matter of some research after that.”

Loki stayed in a crouch, tracking Killian with his eyes. “Is this where you monologue about your grand plan so I can tell everyone else when they show up?”

“Nah. You’re not that interesting honestly, as fun as this has been. Can you do the blue thing, I kind of what to see it in person.”

Loki considered, and flipped him off.

“You’re pretty cavalier considering you don’t know here Pepper is.” That made Loki go more still and he smiled a bit. “Oh, don’t worry. She’ll be just fine, I’m certain.”

“I swear if you have hurt her…”

“You can’t hear her? Oh, well I guess you can’t. That box is pretty airtight.” He smirked, watching
Loki’s face. “Yeah, the ventilation that has to be done to make sure that box still works is pretty complicated so I just didn’t bother.”

Loki sat down slowly, slowing his breathing down consciously as he did.

“I will say this, your friends fucked up my timetable pretty good. This was all supposed to happen before New Year’s so I could have the finale on New Year’s itself. I’m running behind so you’ll have to excuse me. Have fun in there.”

Loki watched him walk away, shifting to a meditative pose and closing his eyes as he lapsed into calculation. Not good. The air isn’t stale, yet, but a space this large isn’t going to give him much time. Plus, the implication did seem to be that something unsavory was happening to Pepper. Which leaves him with about one option and he is never, ever going to live it down the rest of his life.

He sighed and shifted to his knees, staring up at the ceiling through the box and taking a deep breath before screaming. “HEIMDALL! TURN YOUR EYES TO ME! HEIMDALL!”

There was a pair of guards left in the room and they about leaped out of their skins, both shouldering rifles and slowly walking closer to the box. Loki ignored them, eyes shut and waiting for that creepy, oily feeling to skitter across his skin and on the edges of his senses.

And happily he may be on Midgard, he might be mortal, but he’s still a Crown Prince of Asgard. It takes seconds for Heimdall’s gaze to find him, so he shouts six more words to ensure his humiliation, Pepper’s rescue and the Avengers showing up as fast as they could fly from New York. “I NEED HELP! PLEASE SEND THOR!”

The feel of Heimdall’s gaze disappeared and he sat on his heels, regarding the two guards who both had rifles on him. “Thor of Asgard is my big brother.” He said, careful and even, watching comprehension register on their faces. “You two should probably be running.”

“Sir, the Bifrost has been used.”

Everyone looked up at the same time. Tony had multiple displays running, tracking the cars that had taken Loki and Pepper while he talked to Steve about it, who had arrived as fast as quinjets could return them to the tower. “That has to be Loki. He knows we track the Bifrost. Where?”

“Miami, sir.” The current displays minimized in favor of a map showing the Bifrost hit on the state, then it zoomed in again and again, showing Miami proper then the neighborhood. “We have an address.”

“Get us live feed of that location. We’re going to Miami.” Steve said, already moving to get geared up.

“Cap, we’re not set up to fight these guys.” Tony said, making Steve pause. “From what little data Agent sent, I’m not even sure my normal armor will hold up.”

Steve turned and looked at him. “Is this where you tell me you have a project in your back pocket?”

Tony’s grin was one hundred percent vicious. “Yeah, I might. You might want to come with me to the armor gallery.”
“I have to say, Brother, I wasn’t anticipating seeing you in this kind of cell again.” Thor stood outside the box under a hole in the ceiling he’d created, rain pouring through because of the thunderstorm that had happened.

“You’re hilarious. Break it. I’m going to run out of air.” Loki replied, moving to the back wall of the small box and watching Thor take Mjolnir to a corner of the box. It wasn’t designed to take hits from the magical hammer and it shattered, letting him teleport out past the broken sharp fragments. “Our enemy is a man named Aldrich Killian. I’m not sure what he’s up to but it’s nothing good and he has Pepper.”

“And he had you. His time is short.” Thor agreed seriously, and looked up as more guard arrived. He considered then looked at Loki.

Loki bowed slightly from the waist and gestured full arm. “By all means. I’m going to look for Killian himself. Do you have your Midgardian phone?”

“I left that device at Tony’s. It is of no use to me on Asgard.”

He sighed. “Of course you did.”

The guards opened fire. Thor laughed and Loki was already gone, grabbing his jacket and staff before teleporting past them. From there he just kept moving, putting down the guards he passed until one of them just catches his staff and grips it, staring at him with skin that starts glowing orange.

“You’re interesting.” Loki decided, staying braced and keeping his own hands on the staff even as heat starts traveling up the metal length of it.

“You’re going to be a problem.”

“You say that as if I am not already.” He dropped one hand off the staff and extended an ice blade off that arm, bringing it around, making the man let the staff go to try to deflect the blade. The hallway is too narrow to really start a good fight and he finds himself on defensive when one of the man’s swings wings one of his arms and leaves the bright pain of a burn in its wake, the jacket sizzling and burning black immediately.

Then there’s the loud snapping of a handgun echoing down the hall and the man he’s fighting staggers and jerks, turning to face Colonel Rhodes, who stood with a handgun raised. “Loki?”

“Just a second.” He reached his hand into the small of his back under the jacket, finding the power pack there. Without his glasses he has no fine control but he finds what he’s looking for and activates the staff at full power and swings it, cleaving the man’s head from his body. The man started to fall but Loki saw the orange accelerating and lunged, clearing the corridor in a teleport and grabbing Rhodes before teleporting further down the way the other man had come from, satisfied when he hears and feels the percussion of an explosion after. “Good to see you, Rhodey!”

“Yeah, man, what the fuck?”

“Have you seen Pepper?”

“BROTHER!” Thor’s voice boomed.
“Down here!” Loki shouted, and Thor appeared a few moments later.

“They do not fall easily.” Thor walked up. “Machine of War. Where is your armor?”

“That asshole drove me out of it.” Rhodey made gestures. “What, Pepper is here?”

“Yes. Somewhere. Think that asshole’s doing something to her.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“I was taken. I called for Thor.” Loki managed not to cringe when Thor beamed and thumped Loki’s back hard enough to make him grunt. “But honestly, he should be enough. My main goal right now is finding and saving Pepper. Any idea what this is about?”

“I caught some of it. I think he wants to kidnap the president.”

“Kidnapping is a coward’s act.” Thor frowned. “You call a leader out in combat!”

“Not Midgardian leaders normally.” Loki replied. “Agent Coulson said that Killian’s tied to…” He paused as another guard showed up and Rhody put two rounds in him before Mjolnir followed and set the guard through a wall. “… the Vice President through funding.”

“As a member of the American military I would really, really like to stop the President from being kidnapped.” Rhodey was almost droll about it.

“We don’t have our phones.” Loki shrugged helplessly. Rhodey also did. “Alright, you find a phone and call Tony, I’m going to focus on finding Pepper.”

“And I am doing what?” Thor lifted an eyebrow even as Loki started jogging away, hand out to the side to catch Mjolnir.

Loki turned to jog backwards and pointed at him. “Thor smash!” And turned to keep moving.

“… You know, I do love him but…” Thor looked at Rhodey.

“Yes, man, every family has one. I have this niece. Real good with computers but she’s going to get herself into trouble. Guess you’re with me, let’s move.”

Loki found himself more and more annoyed that his shoes hadn’t been with his jacket and staff and frankly, wasting power to change his clothes seems foolhardy at best. Still it left him running barefoot through the old house, having no shame in calling for Pepper and never getting a response, never hearing her voice. He can hear Rhodes and Thor working their way through the building behind him, and it’s clear that Thor was just enough overkill to make this easy.

As he progresses he can tell people are starting to flee, as apparently it’s gotten around that Thor is here (and at one point, a guard just drops his weapon and asks to go, and Loki’s so amused he lets the guy go), then a gunshot is echoing down the hall and Loki ran to investigate.

He wasn’t expecting to find Maya Hansen sprawled on the floor at a base of a stairwell that, in Loki’s judgement, leads upstairs to the main floor of the building (he really hates the architect that designed this place, really, who has this kind of wine cellar labyrinth bullshit in Florida?). He
crouched on his toes, leaning on his staff and looking at her. “I’m not expert in human biology yet but that’s in a bad place. Where is Pepper?”

She blinked at him, looking like she’s trying to follow his question. “Boat. She’s on the boat. Tried to stop him.”

“Tch, if you’re expecting sympathy from me, dear, you’re not going to get any. Never has the expression play with fire, get burned been any more appropriate.” He stood. “If you are very, very lucky we’ll be able to finish this without more civilian deaths with you to blame. Goodbye.”

He cleared the stairs two at a time, pausing when he left bare stone walls for a somewhat opulent living area. Not as appointed as Tony’s Malibu house, he decided, frankly decorated by someone with only the barest idea of what rich people decorated like and then he recognized the décor. The cameras on stands confirmed it so he’s somewhat prepared when he walked into the room to find the Mandarin, talking to two younger women and sounding nothing like he did on the video.

“You’ve got some explaining to do.” Loki announced, making all three of them jump. “I’ve seen your videos.”

The bearded man looked absolutely thrilled. “You’ve seen my work? I had a little hesitance when Mr. Killian first approached me with the role but I have to tell you, being a villain has been fantastic fun.”

“Yes, I’ve had some experience myself.” Loki heard footsteps behind him and waited, Thor arriving then Rhodey. “Pepper isn’t here. I think Killian bolted.”

“Is that the Mandarin?” Rhodes sputtered.

“Yes. Apparently. Did you find a phone yet?”

“You need a phone?” The Mandarin wanted to know, digging into a pocket and coming out with an iPhone. “I heard some noise, is everything alright downstairs?”

“Absolutely nothing is okay.” Rhodes stalked forward and took the phone, unlocking it and dialing from memory.

“He’s had a hard day and the day isn’t yet over.” Loki told the Mandarin.

The man considered. “I’ve had days like those. Would a cigar help? Killian bought me some amazing cigars.”

The cops beat the Avengers to the house, but it was a near thing. Tony hit the ground first because he was flying outside the quinjet, Shouldering past the policemen to get inside. There he disengaged from the armor, leaving it standing empty and lunging to wrap his arms around Loki.

Loki caught him and hugged him tight. “Pepper’s not here. I’m sorry I am so sorry.”

“You’re here. We’ll find her. Sorry we’re late.”

“I had some help.”

He let go and looked to Rhodey. “You okay man?”

“That son of a bitch has my armor. Other than that, yeah.” Rhodey joined them, then Thor.

“Are the others here as well?”
“Yeah, we’re here.” Steve walked in, the cops parting to watch him go by.

“Wow. Who’s your tailor?” Loki lifted an eyebrow because Steve’s usual combat gear was augmented by what looked like a partial Iron man suit, the colors of the armor synching up nicely with Steve’s uniform.

“So you’re okay then, good to know.” Steve replied without batting an eye. “Pepper?”

“We don’t know. Agent?”

“Working with SHIELD to take the Vice President. We spoke to him on the flight here.”

“And the President?” Rhodey wanted to know.

“I believe Air Force one is already landing and they’re going to take him to the helicarrier because Fury refuses to believe that Killian could do more damage than Loki could.”

“Am I a unit of measurement now?” Loki wanted to know.

“Can we focus?” Tony wanted to know. “Killian’s not here and he’s the big bad, and he probably still has Pepper. Once Killian figures out his plan’s ruined it’s probably going to be very bad.”

“… Is that the Mandarin?” Clint wanted to know, joining them and looking past them at the supposed Mandarin, in the center of a circle of cops, all too happy to talk about his work.

“That is a man named Trevor Slattery.” Loki told him. “An actor from England hired to be the face of the Mandarin for Killian. He appears to have next to no knowledge of what Killian was actually up to as Killian was furnishing him with many and sundry drugs, alcohol and cigars.”

Clint blinked once. “Wow.”

“We landed the quinjet in the front yard. Might be best to retreat there and get on the same page? You too, Colonel Rhodes.” Steve suggested.

“Yes, please, I need to punch Killian in the face more than Steve has ever wanted to punch Hitler.” Tony moved and stepped back into the Iron Man armor.

“I’m very glad you’re okay because he has been all but baying for blood, not that I blame him.” Steve told Loki as they walked out.

“Well I’m happy you’re happy. Tell me you brought me my entire battle kit because I need shoes.”

“I did, and I brought an armor boost for you as well. I’ll explain once we’re all on the quinjet.” Tony replied, the faceplate of his armor up. “We’re being way too calm about this and it’s freaking me out.”

“Speaking as a voice of experience in rescuing loved ones from deranged experiments, an ounce of somewhat calm planning goes a long way.” Steve told him, but he patted the armor on the back.

Natasha was waiting on the ramp of the quinjet and didn’t bat an eye when she saw Loki and Rhodes. “I’ll let Coulson know you two are no longer in enemy custody.”

“Sadly I don’t have much in the way of information. I was drugged nearly out of the gate.” Loki told everyone, accepting a case that had his battle kit and opening it, sitting to put on socks and lace up a set of boots. “Killian was present when I woke up. He goaded me about Pepper, I’m not sure if anything he told me of her is truth or lie. I called for Thor but he was already gone by the time we
“From what he said he wants to use the War Machine armor to kidnap the President.” Rhodey said.

“SHIELD field agents are currently moving on the Vice President, if he says anything I’ll tell you as soon as I know.” Phil’s voice said from the overhead of the quinjet. “Good to know you’re well, Loki, Rhodes. Loki, any idea what they used to put you down?”

“I don’t know. Hansen would know but she’s dead.”

“Unfortunately, we needed to interview her.”

“Yell at Killian about it, I’m pretty sure he shot her. She did say that Pepper was on a boat.”

“There are a lot of boats in Miami.” Rhodes rubbed his face.

“We have a full list of what AIM owns either directly or through subsidiaries.” Tony replied. “Let’s see if he has any maritime assets.”

“Air Force One has emergency landed in a regional airport and we’ve transferred the President and his secret service to a quinjet.” Coulson said after a beat. “The quinjet’s got stealth capabilities so it’s going to use that and stay off the map until this is resolved.”

“AIM does not have any boats listed.” Clint was standing at a monitor on the quinjet, looking at the intel they’d gathered. “So I checked under Slattery. Guess I spelled it right because he does own a boat, or at least, he has potential salvage claim to a boat.”

“Do you suppose Slattery knows that?” Loki wanted to know, looking at the hole burned in his coat with a resigned sigh before setting it aside and getting a new one out of the case, having already donned the chest underarmor.

“What kind of boat are we talking about?” Steve wanted to know.

“Looks like an oil tanker. It’s listed as damaged and parked on the coast.”

“Strange place to make a statement.” Tony said after a beat.

“Where would you make a statement while kidnapping the president?” Rhodey wanted to know.

“I don’t know, the Statue of Liberty?”

“Nah, man, Magneto tried to use it.” Clint replied. “So yeah, it’s been done. As long as we don’t sink the tanker out from under ourselves we should be alright.”

“Where is Banner?” Thor asked, since that seemed related.

“He stayed behind; he’s going through all the intel we’ve gathered so far on extremis.” Phil replied. “SHIELD agents should be at your location shortly, they’ll see what they can find there and forward it on.”

“Makes perfect sense. Now, kindly explain the new tailoring to me.” Loki gestured at the partial armor everyone else was wearing except himself, Thor and Rhodey.

“It’s a temporary power boost.” Tony replied. “I don’t think we’re set up to fight extremis. You can’t really hand to hand fight them.”
“They are born of fire.” Thor said somberly. “Their flesh burns the air around them, their own clothes, anyone who touches them. Like they are hot iron from a forge.”

“And they heal fast.” Clint said. “Not a whole lot puts them down.” He had probably the lightest armor out of the whole group, his arms still bare except for the archery gear. His quiver was on his hip, worked around the heavier protection on his chest and legs.

“None of this is meant to be ongoing gear. It’s all running on battery and it’ll last four, maybe six hours of continual use and it’s got an emergency ditch function if something happens.” Tony admitted. “But that might be enough. This is going to be one hell of a field test.”

“The satellite we had looking at this house is adjusting to look at the boat. So far we can see some new cars parked and some activity, but that’s it.” Natasha was standing at the screen with Clint, her armor boost mostly showing in the fact that she’s got less obvious curves.

“A group this big, we’re not exactly going to be sneaky.” Rhodey observed.

“Allow me to lead and bring them a storm.” Thor suggested. “Uneven quenching is the friend of no weapon being forged.”

“At least the weather here’s not freezing.” Clint brought up a map and showed Thor where they were, where the boat was and what the boat looked like. “You got it? Don’t start the party without us.”

“I would never!” Thor patted Loki on the back on his way out.

“They’re not going to know what hit them. He seems a bit offended on my behalf.” Loki said after a beat.

“Well then we need to get you in your new gear and come up with a plan.” Tony replied. “Because while I am also more than offended on your behalf, they still have Pepper.”

“At the very least after this maybe people won’t try to attack the tower.” Steve huffed.

“Don’t count on it.” Phil replied. “Vice President is in custody, I need to go speak to him. Good luck, Avengers.”

Thor whipped up quite a storm for Killian. The rest of the team ended up bracing themselves in the quinjet, which in spite of being a very stable aircraft capable of vertical takeoff in nearly any environment or weather was being rocked by the storm.

“Right now Florida’s wondering where the tropical storm came from.” Clint muttered from the pilot’s seat. “That’s not a joke. They actually are. It has a trending hashtag and it’s already dubbed Tropical Storm Surprise by one weatherman.”

“I do get the distinct idea that Thor’s pissed off.” Tony was actually inside the quinjet because, well, fuck that. “I’ve actually got a very nifty trending chart about storm severity versus his mood. It’s like a mood ring but with rain.”

“I’m not sure if I should be happy about this protective streak or not.” Loki was managing not to
cringe with the thunderclaps. He had buckled in, which was a rather unpleasant callback but at least this time Thor wasn’t going to burst in and scruff him like a cat.

“He did save your ass.” Rhodey pointed out, looking semi naked since he was entirely out of combat gear and toting a borrowed pistol.

“If I hadn’t been having time concerns I would have forgone his assistance. As it is I may never live it down.”

“So, I kind of want to say hello to this asshole with the turret, any protests?” Clint wanted to know.

“Only if I get to use the loudspeaker.” Tony countered.

“Like I can actually stop you. There’s the dock.”

Lit by floodlights and lightening the shipping dock still didn’t look particularly menacing. No more so than most shipping docks in bad weather anyway. The crane was still, a shipping container dangling in the rig, the damaged oil rig anchored and tied at the dock. Thor was nowhere in obvious evidence, but given the intensity of the storm he’d probably actually decided to wait for them.

“I’ve got plenty of hot spots that are probably extremis users. Mostly on the boat, also in the crane’s control cab. And one in the sealand.”

“That’s Pepper.” Tony closed up his helmet. “Majority chance Killian’s in the crane cab.”

“I’m increasingly insulted this man of all villains got one over on us.” Loki unbuckled and stood.

Clint brought the quinjet around and turned on the lights, blazing them into control cab of the crane from about twenty feet out as the turret aimed. “It’s all you Stark.”

“It always is.” Accessing the speakers of any of SHIELD’s flying equipment was pretty much old hat for Tony so he did it again. “Hey, shit head, did we come at a bad time?” His angry demand was half lost in the storm and the noise of the engines but apparently had some effect because the figures in the cab opened fire on the quinjet, the bullets pinging away from the cockpit.

So Clint hit the switch to open the ramp, then opened fire with the turret. Tony was out the back immediately, Loki grabbed Steve and Natasha and teleported out to the crane’s platform. Clint ceased the turret and backed off to land, not wanting to inflict friendly fire.

Thor landed on the platform by Steve. “They are many. Most are on the ship.”

“Tony focus on getting Pepper. I’ve got Killian for now.” Loki said as they walked on the metal grating, pausing as more gunfire pelted their way and Steve brace with the shield up to turn a few shots.

“Save some for me.” Tony was already hovering by the shipping container.

Loki snorted and teleported past Steve on the narrow walkway, popping into the already shot up control cab and going to work to disarm the enemy there. Even flicking the Wardenclyffe on and off did very little to the enemy, even taking one of their hands off to send the gun flying out the window only seemed to piss them off. “Killian’s not in the cab.”

Steve and Thor came in and sent the enemy flying out the windows to fall several stories in the rain in short order. “Blunt weaponry isn’t going to do much damage. They even try to recover from blows from Mjolnir.” Thor said.
“Explosive arrows worked but it wasn’t exactly fun.” Clint said, having closed up the quinjet. His armor boost let him get some height, standing on top of a stack of shipping containers, lining up a shot on one of the enemy coming from the boat.

“Pepper!” Tony had gotten the shipping container doors open in spite of it swaying heavily in the rain.

“I am going to throw up all over you.” Her voice replied.

“Awesome! Come here so I can get you down!”

Loki laughed. “Alright. Main concern down, let’s just find a way to make them regret their poor choices.”

“Guys, we have an easy two dozen of these assholes.” Clint announced. “Not sure which one’s Killian from where I am because honestly they all look equally pissed off and they’re all coming toward you. What’s the game plan?”

“I had hoped the storm would weaken them by removing their heat.” Thor admitted.

“Then we need to remove more heat. Luckily that’s one of my specialties.” Loki nudged Thor. “Mind you I will have to focus to do these things. If I can embrittle them it will be for seconds at a time.”

“Seconds sounds like just long enough.” Natasha replied with a bit of a smile.

“Sounds like it to me too. Let’s go.” Steve agreed. “Can you take us down?”

“Oh, certainly.” Loki stepped back outside then grabbed their gear once they joined him, teleporting down to ground level and having to put Natasha down gently as he’d ended up scruffing her by her gear. “Sorry.”

“No offense taken.”

“Pepper’s in the quinjet. The son of a bitch took her ring.” Honestly Tony hadn’t thought he could get more pissed off. Apparently he’d been wrong.

“Well why take hers and leave mine especially when he was dickish enough to take my chucks off?” Loki wanted to know.

“I have no idea.”

“Guys am I the only one fighting right now?” Clint complained.

“Never!” Thor replied, off the crane’s walkway and letting Mjolnir lead him to a chest-first blow with one of the enemy.

“Let’s go find Killian and ask him.” Loki suggested as he ran to join the fray. Steve and Natasha next to him. “Alright, Clint, I need you to pick me out a target to focus on.”

“You got it.” Another arrow zipped down into the yard and tagged one of the extremis soldiers on the shoulder, then started spraying purple smoke.

Two dozen was, Loki reflected, as good a number as any for how many enemy they were dealing with. All of them were steaming in the rain, their skin glowing like banked embers. They were armed and moved like trained soldiers, gathering in formation to defend only to have their formation
shattered by Thor arriving. Hawkeye’s arrows seemed at most to be an annoyance, though he’d left one corpse in the rain. “So there is a limit to the regeneration.”

“Highlander rules.” Phil’s voice came onto the radio. “Well, hybrid Highlander and zombie rules.”

“Behead and destroy the brain. Understood.” Natasha said as Steve’s shield whipped through the rain and disarmed two. “Need that thing you’re doing, Loki.”

“Working on it. Don’t let me get killed.” He used his staff to pole vault over one and ended up more or less surrounded. Unpleasant, then he had to put his focus almost entirely on the one that Hawkeye had put an arrow in (a woman who had since pulled it out). The ground around him frosted over and froze in a widening circle then moved to her. Freezing her clothing is the start then he’s battling with the supernatural heat in her body. He senses, more than feels, Thor land next to him and move to keep the enemy back.

Instead Loki reached out and grabbed Thor’s arm, then used his power for himself. Not a good habit to get into even if he’s got a big spell depending on it soon, but he’s able to blast his internal winter out in a circle instead of focusing on one, stopping the five around him.

“It feels so odd when you do that.” Thor gave him a look as they stood in the rain surrounded by ice on the ground and frosted sculptures of soldiers.

Clapping interrupted them and Killian walked up, the rest of his men falling back to be alongside or behind him. “Very, very impressive but I don’t think it’s going to last very long…” He didn’t get any further because Tony zipped out of the sky and drove Killian to the ground, kneeling over him and bringing a fist down in a punch.

“I can’t argue that.” Steve said after a beat.

Thor hefted Mjolnir and swung as Steve and Natasha did, working on putting the frozen figures to the ground. Loki ran past, the water making it easy to freeze the ground under the other soldiers and hem them in with ice walls. Petty annoyances and their heat cut his ice fast, but he compensated nearly as quickly.

Tony’s armor had been through a lot of fights and strange situations, all neatly listed in files, one for every Mark of armor. Every fight was a learning experience, things he had to alter and change to compensate for a new string of variables, but generally speaking the Iron Man armor, larger than life and heavy and powerful, won versus most human sized targets. Some exceptions of course, most of which were friends of his these days thank everything.

New variable: extremis, and his armor isn’t handling it nearly as well as he’d like. The son of a bitch had actually caught his hand on the second hit and had dug the other one into his chest plate, and in the space of seconds his armor is giving him dozens of warnings as the temperature allowances are overwhelmed. Not even fifteen seconds into the fight and he’s got a very good idea of how this asshole drove Rhodey out of War Machine, but Killian can’t fly so he engages thrusters and kicks off the ground, digging both hands into Killian in spite of the heat and dragging him with.

“Sir, the gloves of the suit are degrading rapidly as is the chest plate.” JARVIS reported.

“Trust me.” He turned and set himself on a collision course with the ocean. “I’ve noticed.”

“Alright, Loki. I think you’ve humiliated them enough.” Steve decided and Loki dropped his hands and leaned on his staff, tolerating Steve patting him on the back. Thor stood on Steve’s other side, idly spinning Mjolnir. “Who’s second in command here?”
One of Clint’s arrows zipped down and hit the leg of one of the men, making him swear and yank it back out. “That guy.”

“… Thanks, Hawkeye. Very helpful.” Natasha said flatly.

“Helpful is my middle name.”

“I thought it was Fucking.” Loki reflected.

Steve had long given up on any semblance of being professional on the radio, walking to the edge of the melted ice and considering the man that was still gripping the arrow and looking annoyed. “Name and rank, soldier.”

“Savin.” He sneered. “Lieutenant Colonel Eric Savin.”

“Keep him if you can.” Coulson came back onto the radio. “We may even cut him a deal if he rolls over on Killian.”

“One of my superior officers is willing to cut all of you a deal if you give yourselves up right now.”

“I said Savin.”

“Cheaper by the dozen Coulson.” Barton replied.

“You’re not the one that has to write the expense reports.”

Savin, not privy to the radio exchange, was not impressed, and further not impressed when Iron Man erupted from the ocean and landed hard, rolling back to his feet steaming and shaking off. “Just a minute guys.” He held up a hand to show a mangled gold chain with a ring and Loki took a running start before teleporting the rest of the way and grabbing it. “Thank you.”

“Your armor’s done.” Loki observed.

“You’ve done worse.”

“Again, am I somehow a unit of measurement? Where is Killian?”

The storm was lessening, and Tony gestured vaguely at the ocean. “I tackled him to the sea floor and kept my rockets on until we were past the drop then blasted him away. Took his shirt with me because I could see the ring in his pocket.”

“I would rather put eyes on a body or it’s nearly guaranteed he’ll show back up.” Coulson sounded very, very resigned to his life.

“You were all soldiers, right?” Steve asked, looking at the extremis carriers. “You can still be soldiers. I’m sure SHIELD would have a place for you.”

“SHIELD. Really?” Savin wanted to know, orange blazing under his skin and flickers of fire exiting his mouth to fizzle in the rain. “So we can be cannon fodder again? Killian saved us all! None of us had any quality of life before extremis!”

“I might know a thing or two about that.” He replied evenly.

It was a fairly surreal standoff, Tony realized, now that he didn’t have tunnelvision entirely fueled by rage. A warm thunderstorm, a grouping of glowing orange soldiers surrounded by the Avengers, with Thor being the primary damage dealer. He moved to just walk to the confrontation and ended
up ditching out of the suit, letting it collapse behind him. Loki set a hand on his shoulder and they walked back together.

Savin was silent, though a bright orange tic flashing at the hinge of his jaw showed how tense he actually was. “I want to respect you, Captain, but you’re part of the problem.”

“I beg your pardon?” Steve shifted slightly, ready to bring the shield back up.

“I would not have you impugn the good Captain, especially as he is not the one who conspired to kidnapping.” Thor had shifted to stand next to Steve and tightened his hand on Mjolnir.

Savin shook his head slightly. “We’re not broken little misguided pawns. We’re not the one trapped, here.” He looked at Thor. “You can kill us, if you try hard enough. Can you kill us all before we kill them?” And the extremis soldiers brought their rifles up simultaneously, heat hissing on their skin as they moved.

Thor roared and swung, Steve ducking the arc and grabbing Natasha as assault rifles chattered. Loki grabbed Tony’s arm and teleported them behind a shipping container as guns swung in their direction, wincing. “Shit!” Tony said with feeling, back to the container and eyes huge, a shiver running through his body.

“Iron Man’s out of armor and out of the fight, Agent Coulson.” Steve relayed, finding cover.

“Well, it’s a good thing everyone forgot about me.” Rhodey’s voice announced, and War Machine appeared above the damaged oil tanker, darting to hover by Clint then landing and bringing up the minigun.

“And we’re back into clusterfuck territory.” Clint said, looking at what he’s got left in his quiver and changing arrowheads before backing up and ducking to avoid gunfire. Thor’s voice raised, brutal and angry, as a burn sizzled along one of his arms, Mjolnir sending two flying then returning to him, then he went still, looking away from the immediate fight curiously. The extremis soldiers all paused as well, slowly looking off to the side and keeping their guns on him.

“What.” Steve asked.

“Pepper!” Tony shouted, moving to grab her then neatly scuffed by Loki, who was watching her with narrowed eyes. “What, no…”

“Wait.” Loki replied.

Pepper had been shoved into AIM swag clothing, at some point, which Loki supposed was better than her business outfit and heels she’d been wearing when they were taken. She looked as angry as he’d ever seen her, her bright hair accented by crackling broken-glass lines of red and orange seething in her skin.

“Pepper.” Thor said, uncertain. “This is not the place for you.”

She responded by looking at his burned arm, frowning even though it was already healing, then looking at the extremis soldiers, all of which had enough survival sense to take a step back from her.

“That son of a bitch used extremis on her.” Tony’s voice was strained, still trying to get away from Loki, who had both arms around him to keep him back now.

“Just wait.” Loki said through gritted teeth, and was rewarded when Pepper dug the toes of someone else’s sneakers into the wet pavement and dead sprinted the short distance at the soldiers.
Pepper wasn’t a fighter, though living with the Avengers, she’d learned a few things. She’d started working out with Natasha and had picked up some self-defense along the way. Now she was just moving rough and angry and fighting dirty. The soldiers weren’t prepared to have one of their own close in trying to hurt them and she went for their guns, grabbing barrels and squeezing them closed with one hand while the other hand slashed up to gouge at eyes.

Which made her a goddamn effective distraction and Thor gently walked into the fight as Clint opened fire again. Very few injuries were actually effective, but apparently, brain destruction did stop the healing process. Their numbers fell rapidly as the rest of the Avengers and War Machine closed ranks around them, worrying them down to the last few, who dropped to their knees and put their hands up, and Savin, who Pepper had by the throat.

“You sons of bitches hurt my family, and kidnapped my boyfriend, and opened fire on my house.” Her hands were hot enough their forms blurred, steam and oven heat crackling as she exhaled.

Savin actually laughed. “We won’t be the last…” He was cut off because she moved, the sheer speed of her blow actually punching a hole into his chest cavity and removing his heart as she took her hand out.

Natasha took Steve’s shield and used it to shepherd Pepper away from the fight, who looked honestly shocked and was panting for air. “That was… extremely violent.” Loki didn’t let Tony go, instead just taking them both to her, Tony’s hands hovering spare inches above her skin, desperate to hold her but feeling the heat rising from her body. “You guys said that people with this blow up oh god am I going to blow up am I going to be okay?”

Loki sighed and reached out, setting a gloved hand on her shoulder and shutting his eyes as he dumped cold into her. She jumped and let out a shocked squeak but he’s careful and fast, like quenching a sword in water, before he opens his eyes again, not surprised that Tony had already gathered her close. “My dear. You’re dating us. You are never going to be okay.”

Tony’s laugh was almost entirely hysteria. “I fix things. I’ll fix it. Hell maybe I can use it to fix me.”

“You don’t need to be fixed.” Pepper pulled Loki into the hug and clutched Tony tighter.

“Coulson? We need a containment crew and a cleanup crew.” Clint decided.

“SHIELD will be on the ground there in five. I’ll be there in half an hour. Please tell me we have a body for Killian.” Coulson replied.

“Not as such.”

“I really, really hate having to mark villains ‘presumed dead.’ It just means they’ll be bombing my favorite coffee shop next week.”

“That’s curiously specific.” Steve said after a beat. The remaining five soldiers were all sitting on the ground with their hands on their head.

A hint of a smile came into Coulson’s voice. “I’ve had a busy life. It has not slowed down since I met you.”
“Have you slept?”

Loki looked past the holograph at Tony. “No.”

“You’re sleeping less than I am. That’s… I’m not used to that happening.” Tony decided, walking over with two mugs of coffee, handing Loki one and staring at the display. “I don’t know what any of that is. Your personal project?”

“I don’t need as much sleep as you do, actually. I sleep with you because I enjoy it. You sometimes forget that I’m not actually human, and that I’m neurodiverse on top of that.” Loki accepted the mug. “Yes. This is spell writing. Don’t worry, when it’s done I’ll show you.”

Tony stared at it. “It’s strange. I don’t know the language but I understand the syntax if that makes sense. There’s a little math in there I understand because I’ve gotten intimately familiar with your math system because of the bifrost project, but the rest, it’s like knowing French then looking at written Italian. I feel like I should be getting it, but I don’t.”

“You don’t know the art.” Loki sighed and shuffled it away, pulling up the extremis project instead. “I’ve also been working on this.”

“Bruce and I got Pepper stable, but we’re not sure how to go about just shutting it off and removing it.” Since Loki was sprawled in one of the living room chairs, Tony gave up and sat on his lap. Loki just arranged him enough to be comfortable and didn’t protest. “There’s a few factors in play here, all of which are equally horrifying and interesting.”

“I’ve seen you have four or five projects that can spring off of it.” Loki gave up and drank the coffee.

“The DNA overwrite thing. That’s what is tripping us up. The delivery mechanism for this basically means that how someone starts with this and how they end up are genetically two different people. That’s proven out with Pepper and the soldiers that SHIELD has.” Tony sighed. “I mean it’s subtle, but it’s like finding the X-Factor in someone even if they don’t have any mutations. It also means it becomes intrinsically part of their body. And since we stabilized Pepper and the soldiers, someone’s going to want to weaponize it even more.”
“You want it gone but it’s pretty.” Loki bottom lined.

“Yeah. I mean, it is. It’d be so incredibly useful for so many things. It’d make space travel easier because we could adapt people to low-g. We could target it to fight cancer or AIDS or diabetes. Hell we could rewrite someone so they just don’t have diabetes anymore, do you know how many people worldwide that could save?” Tony rubbed his face. “It’s a weapon. It could do so much more but it might be impossible to make it stop being a weapon.”

“So it’s a question of parameters.”

“Yes. I fixed it. Maybe too well, or maybe not enough. I don’t know. Right now SHIELD has it but I’ve never been sure how much I trust them.”

“You trust Agent.”

“So do you.”

“Mm. Well, he trusts me, in spite of my killing him. That’s a rather curious way to come about trust, but I’ve accepted it. I also suspect he could actually hurt me if he wanted to.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, he’s an interesting guy. Even if I get the idea he spends most of his time rolling his eyes at us at this point. So how do we undo this?” He gestured at the displays, showing data they have on extremis.

“I’m not sure we have to. We’ve already defined it’s a question of parameters. We need to find the controls. Once we figure that much out, we can redefine the parameters. Like adding an off button.”

He rubbed his face. “So leave it stable and dormant. An off button postulates an on button. That’d just make it easier for people to hide super soldiers. Give it to them then shut it off, then reactivate it when the time comes.”

“You’re feeling paranoid today.”

“That offhand comment Agent made about this not being the worst abuse of human experimentation
he’s seen this year has been sitting with me.” Tony looked at Loki. “It means this sort of shit is ongoing and that either SHIELD is combatting it without making it publicly known, or that SHIELD is doing it and Coulson’s against it.”

“Both, probably.” Loki decided after a beat. “It would nicely explain why he’s still alive.”

“… Oh wow. I do not like that explanation.”

“What does he say about extremis? You’ve spoke to him about it I assume.”

“Yeah, I have. He looked at me and asked if I had this.” Tony laughed sourly. “Which is what Fury asked me when he handed me some of dad’s stuff that led to me fixing the arc reactor. This is when I was sick, mind you. Then Coulson told me to go to work or he’d taser me. So I assume he was asking if I can fix it, but to what end, I don’t know. JARVIS, has he told SHIELD anything?”

“Not as far as I am aware, sir.” JARVIS replied after a beat. “But he has respectfully asked me not to decrypt anything he has to send that’s SHIELD Priority.”

“I’m not sure if I like that but I’m not going to argue it either.”

Loki was silent for several moments, considering the problem. “So we don’t know how to remove it, and if we just shut it off we have the concern of people turning it back on. So we shall do neither.”

“How do you figure because this is really freaking Pepper out if you haven’t noticed.” Tony frowned at him.

“Oh, I have.” Even stabilized she still got hot if she was emotional, the flicker-crackles of orange lifting to her skin and fading. She said it didn’t hurt, though. “You misunderstand what I mean. I think in this case we need to beat swords to plowshares.”

“Deweaponize the weapon. Easier said than done, Bruce and I haven’t made any progress on that.”

“But perhaps easier than removing it entirely. Redefine the parameters. Define it as healing and disease control.”
Tony rubbed his face. “I don’t know man, even that’s giving people more than they were.”

“Not if it’s targeted. Make it a platform to fight disease then release the design worldwide. Make it so everyone has it at once.” Loki sipped his coffee. “Once everyone’s special no one is.”

He stared at him then burst into laughter. “Are you quoting the Incredibles to deal with this?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

Tony stood and paced, taking Loki’s holograph displays with him. “No, I mean, not really. There’s always going to be a risk. Even if we can narrow this thing down to fighting disease someone’s going to find a way to make it trouble.”

“Of course they will. But I guarantee that if you leave it nearly secret and in the hands of SHIELD, it will be even larger trouble. When you guard something and guard it jealously, it is obviously valuable, and someone will try to steal it to no good ends.”

Tony considered. “You have many points but they’re all fueled by that interesting bit of anarchism that you have. I’m building a bifrost man, I need all the money I can get.”

“Tch.” Loki stood and walked to pace with him. “Perhaps. Just because you release the design doesn’t mean you won’t make money on it. You and Banner will have the jump on everyone after all, your people will be able to turn out that diabetes cure, for example, the fastest and for the most efficient cost.”

“Getting it approved will be a nightmare assuming we can get it to work. I mean this whole discussion is based around something I’m not sure we can do.”

“Since when has that stopped you?”

“You two. Bed.” Pepper leaned in the doorway of the bedroom, arms folded. “I’m sure the science talk is very fascinating but both of you were supposed to be asleep, with me, four hours ago.”
Tony and Loki looked at each other and Tony nodded. “You heard the lady. Come on, off to bed, oh neurodiverse alien.”

Loki rolled his eyes but let himself be shepherded.

With Bruce and Tony absorbed in the extremis issue, Loki suddenly found himself in charge of everything else. It was more than a little bit startling because Jarvis had no shame in handing him issues or tasks he hadn’t previously dealt with before. Pepper was still running Stark Industries but suddenly her concerns were coming to Loki, not Tony. He also found himself being the person Justin Hammer was talking to, and very quickly understood why Tony wanted to hire his former rival.

When they weren’t looking Justin Hammer had generated timeline after timeline, reams of pages of planning and contracts. They ended up in a long phonecall as Justin explained what he was doing, step by step, including the hiring process and what they were doing with property. It was still too cold and snowbound in Michigan to start clearing property for construction, really, so they were doing everything inside that they could. Office buildings were rented out and being set up close to the worksite, signs being hung up that they were part of the Bifrost project. People were being hired and put into training already, getting ready for a massive amount of work the moment the weather was good enough.

“I still can’t give an overall project schedule because I need to set up a lot of supply chains. I’ve already started talking to cement companies and such, they’re going to set up a concrete plant as close as they can.” Justin told Loki. He was in the office in the house he’d bought. He’d relayed a message through Jarvis a few weeks ago asking for ‘the type of computer Tony would use to manage this shit’ and Tony had happily delivered so now Justin had joined the small community using holographs to conduct their work. “At this point we basically own Detroit, just so you know. I’ve warned everyone that a lot of the jobs are going to be construction related then once the facility starts going breakers in it’s going to be a lot of hard science jobs but no one seems to care.”

“Well, a lot of people apparently care if you believe the news and the twitter hashtags.” Loki replied, watching those scroll endlessly on a screen. “I’d say you’re going to blow our budget but I’m not sure we have a budget yet.”

“Yeah make sure I don’t. Because I’m trying to keep local and Detroit’s a hard town man. They’ve had their hearts broke bad over and over again and the city itself has suffered massive depopulation. We’re walking in like a miracle, if we don’t pull this off this city will burn us down. Count on it. On a related note I had a visit from friends of yours. With suits and badges.”
“SHIELD?”

“Oh yeah. They’ve been here. I think they were trying to scare the shit out of me but I’m used to people who smile like sharks without moving their eyes. Long and short of it if we can get this ball rolling they might be putting some funding toward our project because they have more than a passing interest in Asgard.”

“I’m not sure I want them involved. The amount SHIELD is trusted around here really depends on who you ask. It’s at arms-length at best.”

Justin scoffed. “Brilliant. So who do we trust?”

“Bruce Wayne and the Fantastic Four are solidly in our pocket. Also a solid list of very wealthy CEOs who want to see this happen. Apparently space holds a fond place in a lot of hearts and they probably don’t have any other angles. SHIELD, I don’t know. They always have an angle.” Loki huffed. “Any other concerns?”

“No. Since when is this your job?”

“Since Tony is busy apparently. Good luck.” Loki hung up and sat heavily. “Jarvis? Can you pull up my spellbook please?” His personal file was now called that and it opened up around him, moving when he reached up a hand to manipulate it, looking at the red flagging Jarvis had added since he’d last seen. “You’re getting good at this.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s not easy. I’m still not sure what it is.”

Loki smiled, considering his work and the possible errors Jarvis had noticed. “Oh don’t worry, I think everyone will quite like it when it’s done.”

“I’ve heard that before sir and never particularly enjoyed the outcome.”

In the end, Tony and Bruce handled extremis, though they had to do so in stages.
The first one involved purposefully breaking the soldiers that SHIELD had. None of which were happy about it, but dealt with it when they were told it was coming with a side order of being pardoned for their crimes in exchange for being such good guinea pigs. Tony didn’t want them being used to reverse engineer extremis later, so he issued them all a second dose that found and consumed the first, and left them with the world’s most effective immune systems. Once it proved out for them Pepper got her dose, though Tony had left her with a slightly torqued up ability to heal.

She’d accepted that with grace, after insisting that she didn’t need it. Tony wanted to protect her, this was his way of protecting her. Loki stayed quiet during the whole thing, turning into silent support because he’d already pointed out he saw no reason to remove her gift. He liked the idea of them all being an element, being ice, fire and electricity. He was privately pleased when the version Tony left her with still let her flash warm with emotion, more so than most people.

There was yet another version that Tony promptly dosed himself with, and let everyone know by walking into the rumpus room and tossing his reactor to Steve cheerfully. After everyone got over their near cardiac arrests, he’d explained, pulling up his shirt to show his healed chest.

“I did not need to get that alongside breakfast.” Phil had been seated, sipping coffee, the entire time the rest of the room had repeatedly dissolved into chaos.

“How do you think I feel about it, at three this morning I was watching my body kick out shards of metal.” Tony complained.

“Eating. I am eating.” Clint said.

“You are always eating.” Loki pointed out. “If we waited until you weren’t eating to talk about such things they would never be discussed… ah. Clever.”

“What’s clever?”

“It wasn’t pleasant.” Bruce admitted, looking wan and tired, but pleased. “But we modified the hell out of extremis to fix him up so I think, at this point, we’ve gotten the hang out of telling extremis what we need it to do.”

“Nice hard bone instead of the sponges that the neutron damage was leaving.” Tony patted his chest.
“I’m going to spend weeks jerking awake because I’ll be thinking something is wrong with the reactor and you are dying.” Loki told Tony.

“Oh. Uh. Sorry?”

“Is there a reason you didn’t tell Pepper or I?”

“I wanted to be sure it’d work! Which meant trying it.”

“So, you have control of extremis?” Phil looked at Tony, face blank.

“Yeah, we’re pretty sure. We hope so at least.” Tony looked at his phone. “Because I released all of the data on the internet about half an hour ago.”

How Tony dodged Phil’s taser was anyone’s guess, and once the chaos had settled back down and Tony had been able to explain to Phil he’d released what was basically a technical thesis with instructions on manufacture and an explanation on how to beat diabetes, AIDS, cancer and other systemic disease, Phil calmed down minutely.

“You’re still turning a human experiment loose on the entire public at will. The world has this now, even altered and crippled. Do you really think someone won’t figure out how to weaponize it again?” Natasha wanted to know. “Because we’ve seen a lot of this lately.”

“We’re pretty sure they won’t. We left some pretty important parts out.” Bruce replied.

“Yes, and all the dinosaurs at Jurassic Park were female.” Clint replied.

“A, Jurassic Park wasn’t real, B, anyone who actually understood dinosaurs would have known to fill in DNA gaps with bird DNA, not frog.”

“If you start the Jurassic Park argument again I will take my taser back from the Captain and use it on you both.” Phil said a bit severely and was awarded with silence. “Natasha has voiced my issue with this. You’re offering a guarantee that you really can’t in any way swear to.”
“Or are you just upset I took your weapon away?” Tony wanted to know. “Because I trust you, Agent. I don’t trust SHIELD. Not really.”

Phil looked at him then stood fully down and straightened himself out a bit. “That’s because you’re an intelligent man. I would have put extremis under lock and key, but there are others in the organization, mostly command, who would have wanted it used on our agents.”

“Now, you see? People keep telling me I’m paranoid but I keep telling them you’re only paranoid if people aren’t out to get you. I don’t like hearing that, for the record, but I’m not shocked.”

He huffed. “I’d say it’s complicated but it isn’t. Weaponizing people is the new version of having nuclear warheads. Everyone wants to have superheroes on their side so if they can’t recruit loyal ones they want to make them. This isn’t even new for the United States, as proven out by the Weapon X program that spat out Wolverine and Deadpool.”

“Personally I find it interesting that America’s program to weaponize people weaponized Canadians.” Clint pointed out.

“It doesn’t really matter where they were from. The point is, you’ve released a tool that makes experimenting on people even easier. This could end really badly.”

“Or really well. We might be able to entirely eliminate diabetes and AIDs in those treated.” Tony pointed out. “We’ve got a version saved back to basically vaccinate people against space, we’ve already contacted NASA about it.”

“The problem with you is that you only see the good outcomes. You don’t see the collateral that might be left along the way.” Natasha replied. “And that’s speaking as a human experimentation victim.”

“As another one, something of the prototype for them actually. I hate to say this but Tony’s right.” Steve said after a beat. Tony stared at him. “There’s always going to be collateral damage. You can do that simply by standing idly by. If you can do the right thing, you should really try to and at least by giving it to everyone he’s removed the implication that it’s actually a weapon even if people try to make it one again.”

“Yeah what’s the worst that can happen here? The next generation of humans is better?” Tony
wanted to know.

“Yeah there’s another movie about that, it’s called Gattaca.” Bruce told him.

“And it’s unendingly lame, much like that Ender’s Game bullshit. Come on, could we get some fuck yeah humans in here please? I’m trying to armor us up for surviving the rest of the universe here because in case you haven’t noticed the rest of the universe is dead set on fucking with us.”

Phil looked at Loki. Loki stared at him. “I do beg your pardon. I am still not a system of measurement.”

“Actually, you are. Your little temper tantrum has been broken down in both human loss and financial loss so, we can literally use you as a gauge of damage.” Natasha said helpfully.

“… Of course you can.”

Phil refilled his coffee mug. “I’m going to my office because I am certain that Tony’s gift to the world has changed my schedule for the day.” That said he moved for the elevator.

“Uh, good luck?” Tony called after him.

“Fuck you Stark.”

“… Damn. I think that’s a first.”

“You do tend to just dump things into his lap.” Steve pointed out.

“Oh come on! Hooray, the reactor is going to be a part of the suits not a part of me! I mean I now have to change every suit of armor I wear to accommodate that but I think that me not dying of long term neutron damage to my body is a better plan.”

“It’s going to be a long day.” Bruce folded his arms and set his forehead on them. Loki patted his shoulder and poured them both more tea.
It was a few days later that Loki decided he might as well go through with it.

He’d gone over the spell again and again, considered the cost, laid awake at night considering the two people he loved and the fact that Tony still didn’t think he’d live that long all said and done. He’d stated he could have used extremis to put Iron Man armor into his bones. He’d thought about it, actually. He could have used it to make himself younger. He’d just decided to be healthy.

Loki hadn’t said anything because he already had a plan of course, he had for a while.

So it was in the evening that he’d left their floor and gone up to the rumpus room, stepping out onto the balcony and folding his arms, looking up. “Heimdall.” He had to wait for a count to ten, then he felt the other man’s gaze. “I need to speak to Thor, if he has time. No rush.”

That said he went back inside and went to the bar, finding the secret cache of red solo cups. “What’s everyone up to Jarvis?”

“Individual tasks, sir, did you want anyone else’s status in particular?”

“No. If anyone starts to come upstairs, ask them to wait a while, I need to speak to Thor in private.”

“Of course sir. Will you be wanting me to go passive for that time period?”

“Yes please, unless I call for you.” He poured the beer as thunder rumbled low outside, then Thor was landing on the balcony, strolling to the door and letting himself in with a grin. “Brother.”

Thor paused and lifted an eyebrow before walking over to pick up the beer. “You want something, out with it.”

“I spoke to you not long ago about a scheme. I’m ready. I can’t do it without you. I have not the power to accomplish what I desire to.”

Thor considered then knocked back all of the beer in two swallows, setting the red cup back down
on the bar. “I do not know how I feel about you using me as a generator for your spells, brother.”

“It isn’t exactly something I desire to do often myself.” Loki waved a hand in dismissal. “The spell will do what we discussed. Those whose names I have wrote in will shed years and find their youth again, and keep their current minds.”

“And the cost?” Because Thor had learned the hard way with Loki to ask the cost of his magic.

“I can’t make those years disappear. They have passed. They must go to someone else. I’m afraid that has to be you. The years that they are losing are not so many to your long life.”

Thor considered. “A few hundred, perhaps less.”

“Perhaps.”

“I will bear that burden. That cannot be it.”

Loki shook his head slightly. “If I was just reverting their age it’d be easier, but the cost of keeping their minds their current ages, letting them keep all their memory? That has to be paid as well. Time is expensive to barter with, especially human time because it runs so very fast.”

“And you are paying that? With what?”

“… Memories of my own. For every Midgardian year of their memories I protect I’m likely to lose equal of my own.”

“Brother. I told you that you play dangerous games. That is too much. I know you love them much and I love them as well but that is an unfair burden to carry.”

“It is not so many years, Thor. I know it’s just another candle flicker in the wind to you but to this planet it could be anything. It’s another several decades of these people protecting their world. Midgard has never really had a chance. Not really. Not with people like us being so overjoyed to meddle.”
Thor was silent for a few moments. “You have not lost your silver tongue.”

“But until I have died and probably not even after. You know that.”

He bowed his head slightly and put his hand on Loki’s shoulder. “Tell me what you need of me.”

Sometimes, magic astounded Loki. Literal months of preparation and work and revisions, and complicated math, and it all comes down to this. White chalk, herbs, and words.

Of course, only a few words in and he’s committed. There’s no going back. He can only hope that everyone decides to forgive him.

Jarvis can’t say what’s happening. There’s energy of some kind flowing out of the rumpus room, not really the kind of power he can interpret besides as ‘magic’, and it’s interfering with his systems. He had to shunt systems and that’s when he realized at the Avengers were going down mid step. Tony and Bruce collapsed and curled up in the lab with cut off cries, Clint followed then Agent Coulson, then Pepper and Natasha. Jarvis’ inquiries were met with nothing and he ended up going to Steve, the only Avenger seemingly not affected, and begging him to go to the others.

This is when he realized that an aurora borealis had phased in above the tower and the world had noticed that, and that they were starting to get phonecalls from outside the tower, from numbers he had flagged to-answer. Various other New York heroes, and SHIELD, but how to answer? He had no information.

Then as fast as it all happened, it was over and his systems started coming back to normal. He checked back into the rumpus room as Steve shouldered the staircase door open that let him onto Tony’s lab floor, and found Thor kneeling on the floor, holding Loki. Both their hearts were beating, that was enough for Jarvis for the moment and he moved on to check on the others.
“Tony? Tony, Bruce!” Steve shouted, typing in the override code Jarvis had given him ages ago for the lab doors, shoving through as they opened. “Music off!” That worked as well and he ducked into their main work space, finding Bruce still down and Tony having rolled to his hands and knees, coughing. “Oh thank God, Jarvis sounded scared out of his wits, what happened?”

“You think I know?” Tony demanded, voice coming out significantly … different, which was enough to give himself a bit of pause before he sat back and looked at Steve, who was now gaping at him. “What? Help me up, fuck, everything fucking hurts.”

“… Jarvis, this IS Tony right?” Steve wanted to know, already helping him up.

“It is, sir. Though…” Jarvis trailed off.

“What the hell is wrong with both of you… Oh.” Tony caught his own reflection in some of the glass and grabbed one of his screens, bringing up a camera view of himself because he didn’t have a mirror in the lab. “Oh. OH, fuck, I haven’t seen this handsome devil in more than twenty years oh my god.” He cupped his own face, laughing. “What the hell?”

“Tony?” Bruce wanted to know from the floor. Steve hooked him under the armpits and stood him up. “Thank you. Holy shit, I feel like I have a Hulkover, did I change and not realize it?”

“No! No, come here.” Tony reached out and yanked Bruce into the video feed. “Look at us! Look how young we are!” He saw Bruce’s face and looked at him. “Do you…”

“Still have the Hulk? Yeah, he’s here.” Bruce said after a moment of introspection. “Which… that doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense, how did we…”

“Captain Rogers! Stark, Doctor Banner!” Phil’s voice called.

“In here, Agent!” Steve called, then paused as Phil walked in. “… Oh.”

“I need a tailor and a barber.” Phil cleared his throat. He had thick near-black hair that was dangerously close to getting into his eyes, and his suit and shirt were a bit baggier on what was clearly a tighter, slenderer frame. And, Tony noticed, he had a stud piercing in one earlobe.

“Holy shit, Agent, you have a little something going for you.” Tony was staring.
“If by little something, you mean a lot of hair, yes. I wasn’t born bald.” He deadpanned. “I assume this is Loki, by process of elimination.”

“I hadn’t made that connection, but, yeah that actually makes perfect sense.” Tony said upon reflection.

“Sir, Miss Potts is asking for you.” Jarvis said.

“Shit, Pepper, okay. Uh, upstairs? Are we meeting upstairs? We’re meeting upstairs see you there.” Tony darted out of the room.

“Agent Coulson I am getting a lot of very insistent phonecalls from a lot of people.” Jarvis said after a beat. “I would like you in the rumpus room just so someone with authority can answer them.”

“Steve, can you go with Bruce upstairs?” Phil asked after a beat. “Jarvis, I’m going to go to Clint and Natasha then I will come up.”

“Of course sir.”

Tony found Pepper in the bathroom, having washed off all her makeup and was staring at herself in the mirror. “Babe?”

She looked at him and startled. “Holy shit. Tony?”

“Yeah. Loki’s been busy, we think. You’re fucking adorable.”

She pouted. Her hair was chin length and growing out layers, and she had more freckles. “Shut up, my hair’s terrible and I wasn’t using enough sunblock when I was this young.”

He pulled her close. “Adorable. Come on, everyone’s going upstairs. It looks like everyone but
Steve might have gotten caught by this, and you won’t believe how Agent looks.”

“Okay. This is so weird. Do you hurt all over?”

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck, actually. You too?”

“Yeah. Ow.”

They leaned on each other back to the elevator, taking it back up. Phil hadn’t arrived with Clint and Natasha yet, but everyone else had gathered loosely around Thor. Thor was sitting on the floor, Loki laying on the floor with a pillow tucked under his head. “Man of Iron! I am glad to see his spell worked as he designed it.”

“So he did make everyone younger?” Tony all but ran over, taking Pepper with him. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Not sure. His heartbeat’s steady and his breathing is solid.” Bruce was also sitting on the floor next to Loki. “We don’t know enough about how his spells work. He’s worked himself to exhaustion before though so this might be similar.”

“Sir the phone calls really are not stopping and several news organizations are also now calling. Who should I prioritize?” Jarvis wanted to know. “Master Loki’s vital signs are steady; I will continue to monitor him.”

“Give priority to Nick Fury because I’m sure he’s one of the calls.” Phil walked in, trailing Clint and Natasha. Natasha was barely changed, Clint was shaggy haired and baby faced, sporting a shit eating grin as he walked.

“Hawkass you look far too pleased about this.” Tony looked him up and down.

“Are you kidding? This is awesome! And I never got to meet my boss when he was this young.”

“Agent Coulson, I have reports and cell phone video of an aurora above Stark Tower, lasting approximately thirty-seven seconds.” Nick Fury’s voice came onto the overhead. “During that time
period I had to deflect what I will describe as a magical influence.”

“Young sir. I’m currently about twenty-five years old.” Phil replied.

There was a silent pause. “Ah. Well, it wouldn’t have done much. What’s going on?”

“Loki apparently decided to make all of us about the same age as the Captain, sir. Loki’s currently out, so we have no other explanation. Thor?”

“This is something we discussed previously.” Thor said after a beat. “He has always played schemes but this one, I willingly assisted with. Midgard is better off having you in your primes.”

“And it wouldn’t have occurred to you that this is something that should be discussed?” Fury asked. “Altering people without their consent is not something good guys do.”

“Your mistake for ever thinking I was a good guy.” Loki said, voice muffled into the pillow and sounding like he wanted to pass back out. “Did it work?”

“Hell yeah it worked.” Tony leaned over him, grinning down at him. “I don’t know what you’re up to but I approve, this is great.”

“Of course you’d approve.” Phil sounded resigned as he was.

“Now that you’re awake, can we get an explanation?” Fury wanted to know.

“Help me sit up.” Loki grunted as Thor hefted him into a sitting position, and he shook off. “Fury, I attempted to include you in this. Your defenses were unexpected and I didn’t feel like fighting about it.”

“Strange helped me set them up years ago, so I’m very glad you didn’t.”

He frowned at Phil. “I’m actually surprised it worked on you. I won’t get into why.”
Phil blinked once, face going blank.

“Why I did this? As if it isn’t obvious. I’m a greedy selfish son of a bitch. I want more time with the people I care about. My little makeshift family. Of course, it just so happens that giving these people more time will also work out quite well for this world. So perhaps I’m being greedy about the right thing, for once.” Bruce had brought a glass of water, and he took it with a nod of thanks. “I felt like trying to discuss the logistics would just lead to headaches. Better to do, and ask for forgiveness.”

“I would have been against it on the principle of being suspicious about the actual cost.” Phil admitted.

“The cost is paid, by my brother and I. It’s of no concern to you. Just realize I won’t be doing this again.”

“Once seems like enough. Let’s not play at immortality.” Bruce said after a beat.

Tony tossed an arm over his shoulders. “YET. Let’s not play at immortality YET.”

“That frightening statement aside, I think this could be interesting.” Steve looked around at everyone.

“With the bifrost being built here, you all need to be at your peak.” Thor said soberly. “It may do great things for this planet, but it might also bring great threats. You must be ready.”

“I hate statements like that. I’m paranoid enough.” Fury’s sigh carried through the phone, as did the sound of him hanging up.

“Is this the personal project you were working on?” Tony asked Loki.

“Yes. It was. I told you I’d show you when I was ready.”

“… This is revenge for me not giving warning about removing the arc reactor isn’t it?”
“Well, no, it wasn’t meant to be but I must admit the lineup is very convenient.” Loki paused and looked past Tony. “Clint’s even more bendy. That’s horrifying.”

“It’s amazing is what it is!” Clint said happily. Phil smacked his ass and unbalanced him, sending him to the floor. “Hey! Unfair boss.”

“You say that like I’ve ever played fair. Now we’re the same age.” Phil was smiling a bit.

“Those three are going to be even more horrifying than usual.” Tony muttered.

Loki punched Thor’s shoulder. “Smile. This will be fun most of the time.”

Thor laughed.
Soooo. I got my Loki muse back after watching Thor Ragnarok. How you guys been?

“Steve? Are you having fun on Facebook?” Tony wanted to know as he walked into the rumpus room, pausing once he saw Steve. “Nice turban.”

“Thanks. I did some charity work at the local Sikh temple today. They are really awesome people. One of them showed me how to wrap it.” Steve had one of the hot pink laptops and was looking far, far too pleased about his turban. Tony couldn’t blame him, exactly.

“I am torn between saying never show that to the public, and demanding you post it so we can eat popcorn while watching people make fools of themselves.”

“He already tweeted a picture, sir.” Jarvis replied.

“Oh lovely, let us know if your servers start to melt. But really, Sikh temple? I’m the least religious man in the building and I would have gone to help if you’d invited me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time. They’re definitely on the list of places of worship I will return to.”

“Glad you made friends.” He looked over Steve’s shoulder. “But seriously man, your fucking Facebook.”

Steve’s Facebook (and twitter, and tumblr) was a clusterfuck of charity work (and he was very picky), food (he was doing the world’s slowest restaurant crawl through New York and took recommendations), workout stuff (which was probably why half the people watched him, sweaty Cap in workout photos), pro-vaccination reality checks, and other such nonsense. And because he’s Steve he was nothing but polite to everyone. He’d taken to social media like a duck to water, which Tony had decided was sensible. He suspected it was how Steve controlled his own image instead of being relegated back to his performing-circus-monkey days.
Still it turned out a lot of people had problems with the actual opinions of Steve Rogers, actual human being.


“Charity stuff, illegal pet trade.”

“Yet another animal whose terror response is being adorable. Reminds me of Hitchhiker’s Guide; they should be glad we can’t catch them to sit on them.” Phil had just gotten off the elevator but apparently caught the end of the conversation. “Nice turban.”

He grinned. “Why thank you.”

“I have an official request and some highly unofficial advice that Tony will back me up on.”

“I will?” Tony blinked.

“You will. Enthusiastically. Then you’ll probably have some things to say to me, I have a few ways you could go with it, I’m not sure which is majority odds.”

“You’ve gotten creepier since you got younger. I didn’t even think that was possible.”

“I mellowed out with age.”

“Okay shoot. Official request?” Steve said.

“Command wants you to move your residence to Washington DC to be closer to the Triskelion. There’s a few reasons for this but the primary reason is so you can start working with a Strike Team and go with them on missions.”

He stared at Phil. “Without the Avengers.”
“Without most of the Avengers, it’s possible that Natasha and Clint might be on these missions.”

“Oh boy, spy stuff.” Tony said. “Not cool, we’re a team.”

“Wasn’t my idea, Stark.”

“I agree with him. I’m part of this team, and I like the residence that Tony’s provided me with. I don’t have any good reason to leave Brooklyn.” Steve said evenly. “But, I also understand orders are orders. I’m certain if they want me doing that work, I can find a nice hotel to stay in, or overnight on base.”

“Housing in DC is a pain in the ass anyway.” Tony shook his head.

“SHIELD would provide an apartment actually.” He saw the looks and half smiled. “The highly unsolicited advice, in part, would be me telling you to refuse that flat out. I’m sure you can figure out why.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Use hotels and switch hotels every time. Make reservations under a fake name, Tony knows how to do that I’m certain, it’s a thing some celebrities do. Officially I can’t tell you any of this, unofficially, yeah. They’ll try to spy on you.”

“We’re on the same team.”

“Welcome to SHIELD. The other option would be for Tony to help you find a residence then have him slap his security systems on it. We actually have to work to defeat his gear.”

Steve rubbed his eyes. “Is there a particular reason they’d want me with a strike team instead of just sending the Avengers?”

“Subtlety.”
They both looked at Tony, who crossed his arms. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“You, the Hulk, and Thor do not exactly have ‘quiet’ as your middle name, and your team tactics are, well. Getting a lot better but you’re not military and you never will be. The Captain is.” He looked back to Steve. “It’s something to think about. Now that everyone’s young they want everyone back into the field or as near as it gets. Except Bruce, they’re perfectly happy with Bruce sticking to lab work. Less property damage.”

“I don’t think he’d argue that.”

“And Loki would probably be excellent at spy work, if he wasn’t considered unstable.” Phil conceded. “The front page of his file is mostly giant red text.”

“I don’t think he’d argue that either.” Tony snorted. “He’s been gone all day, had brunch with Olivia Collier then was going to meet up with Dr. Strange.”

“Neither of these things necessarily endear him to me.” Phil rubbed his eyes. “Depending, of course, on why he’s talking to Strange.”

“Back to the original point.” Steve interjected. “Let command know I’m fine with the concept of working with strike teams, but I need to speak to the teams and maybe do a few exercises together first. Unit cohesion. I’m also very against actually moving to the DC area, and Avengers callouts will take precedent over anything black book that SHIELD wants me to do.”

“Understood, consider it relayed.” Phil nodded then turned on heel and saw himself out of the rumpus room.

“Doctor Strange, huh?” Steve started unwrapping the turban, setting it aside.

Tony blinked. “Did you get a haircut then learn how to wrap a turban because that, that’s some amazing irony. Also, I like the new hair.”

“Yeah, I got a little more modern I guess. I’m considering growing a beard.”
“Do it. Loki’s been wanting to talk shop with Strange since the Christmas party.” He flopped on the couch next to Steve. “He says it’s part of trying to adapt to his circumstances. He’s still cut off from a lot of what he used to be, and he doesn’t want to go to Odin and ask for the limit to be removed. He’s trying to work inside of it.”

“I can admire that.” He clicked over to his Instagram. “Do you know how many hero fanpages are on these websites?”

“You want shock, look yourself up on Pornhub.”

Steve paused, looking at Tony. “No.”

“Wimp.”

Tony was back in his apartment when JARVIS let him know that Loki was home and on the way up, which made him check the time on his phone. “Damn, he must have eaten dinner out too.”

“He’s been busting his ass on your projects lately. He deserved a day off.” Pepper was curled in a chair with a book, happily ignoring Tony’s fidgeting. “Why are you so antsy about it?”

“I don’t know? I guess I’m not used to people having to go outside my range for help.” He said after a beat, flopping on the couch. “I get I can’t help him with magic but I still feel sort of bad about it.”

She looked at him. “You’re basically a one-man cheerleader squad. He knows you support him. That’s more than enough for him.”

“I’m home.” Loki let himself in, taking off his jacket and hanging it up.

“Hey baby. How was your day?” Tony called back, staying on the couch.

He considered then let himself change as he walked into the living room proper, voice altering even as he spoke, the flow from male to female almost as easy as it used to be. “Actually, rather
Pepper paused, looking up from her book. Tony fell off the couch and sat on the floor, staring. “What?”

“Oh come now. We’ve talked about this.” Loki rolled her eyes and walked over to get Tony off the floor. “I still can’t do large mass manipulations, but this is actually a very minor one and I have to say, it’s refreshing. I’ve been stuck as one gender since Thor originally put me in your care, and I assure you that’s far longer than almost any previous stretch.”

Tony stood there blinking, looked Loki up and down then at Loki’s face again. “What?”

Pepper burst into laughter. “Oh my god. You broke him. You actually broke him!”

“If this broke him, how do I explain that I actually have more than two genders?” Loki wanted to know. “Technically I can be any gender and physical sex and there’s so many more than two!”

“Okay, stop, my brain’s trying to come out of my ears, holy shit.” Tony stepped back, gesturing helplessly at Loki’s current form. “That’s just, that’s unfair, are you just beautiful however, is that how this works? Is this a default setting? Do you choose how you look all the time?”

“Actually, those are fair questions.” Pepper set her book aside. “I never thought about it, but I guess if you’re a shapeshifter by nature, is the you we know the default you?”

“Yes, actually, for a given value of default. My Jotun self is as real as it gets, born in. The glamour, I grew up with that glamour. It’s automatic, requires no shaping, so I suppose it’s as default as it gets.” She tapped her lips with one finger in thought. “And this is just the female variation of that form. I chose no particular feature, I just set the slider to female, if you allow. Certainly I can change how I actually look but that’s a hell of a lot of work and I have to put active thought into maintaining it.”

“I’m guessing Doctor Strange helped you with all this?”

“Yes actually! He was an incredible resource in helping me adapt my connections to magic to this world. Previously I was connected to Asgard, and I loathe as I am to admit it, Jotunheim. I’ve all but lost those connections and had to open new pathways. It’s still not much, but it’s certainly better, gave me back some abilities I sorely missed. Also, I am never picking a fight with him. He’s
terrifying. He’s not necessarily more powerful than I am, but he wields it like a surgeon’s blade, exact tiny cuts.” Loki gestured helplessly. “What is that quote from that Midgardian warrior? I don’t fear a man who practices a thousand punches, I fear a man who practices one punch a thousand times?”

“That actually makes sense. Before he was injured he was a neurosurgeon. Also, that ‘warrior’ you’re quoting is Bruce Lee, so. I guess that’s accurate to call him that.” Tony reflected. “So uh, from a science side, this change? Is it just appearance or is it organs and everything?”

“Organs and everything. Your medicine would believe me born female, though things aren’t entirely situated the same way internally. I’m not human.” Loki was droll. “Same as when I’m male, or anything in between or otherwise.” She saw the look. “Don’t try to parse that with human anatomy knowledge.”

“Uh, okay, yeah wow.”

She looked to Pepper. “So how long before he breaks and touches me?”

Pepper gigglesnorted. “Babe, you’re losing your mind, just touch her already.”

Tony blinked up at Loki for a moment before reaching up to cup her cheek, smiling when Loki leaned into it. “So pronouns. Just, whatever you’re in at the moment?”

“Yes. Exactly. Odin used to say ‘Thor, who is my son, and Loki, my child who is both.’ Generally, they were never quite sure which of me to see at the dinner table once I got the hang of it, though I started leaning male more often when Thor started hanging out with the Riders of Rohan.”

“Trying to put yourself on even footing?”

“Right, though I should never have bothered. I’ll never be on even footing with them, even now.” She paused and rolled her eyes, grabbing Tony and pulling him in to faceplant to her chest. “There. Better?”

“Mmn yes.” He stayed there.
She looked at Pepper and gestured helplessly, smiling ruefully. “Men.”

Pepper gaped, then laughed so hard she cried.

“You know, I’m looking at the news stories coming out of Detroit and I have no idea what Justin Hammer is doing.” Bruce was staring at a tablet.

“What part, the part where he accidentally organized a gang, or the part where he gave a speech to an auditorium packed full of potential employees while having one leg of his suit rolled up to show his ankle jewelry?” Tony poured Bruce his tea and pushed the mug over to him. “Because I can only offer you personal theory on any of it. Loki, you’ve been the one talking to him for a bit has he offered any explanation for any of this?”

“Well, the first came out of the second. Our property is almost cleared, the blueprints are official, they’re starting to stake out the start of construction. So he’s been in recruitment mode locally, trying to get enough people.” Loki gestured helplessly. “Which is where the auditorium comes in, I suppose. He and Cupcake…”

“Do we seriously still not know his name?” Tony wanted to know, pouring a tea for Loki and passing it to him.

“I’m sure we have it on file somewhere, but that’s what I know him as. Both he and Cupcake are on ankle monitors as part of the deal that let them change what state they lived in. I watched video of his speech, apparently he was trying to bottom line his expectations. Bringing us to the gang thing. His statement was, ‘Oh, and I don’t give a god damn about your east coast west coast gang banger bullshit, you come to work for me, you’re on my clock, you’re part of my gang. Period.’”

“Oh dear god.” Bruce was just staring at Loki. “He said this to locals in Detroit? And got away with it?”

“Apparently. People working the site have been spotted wearing shirts that say, interchangeably, ‘Hammer’s Gang’, or ‘Bifrost Gang’, or ‘Stark Industries Gang’. Apparently there hasn’t been any real consensus on which it should be called but no one’s mad about it because everyone knows what each other mean.”
“They’re either going to hold him up as a local hero or shoot him by the end of this.” Tony rubbed his eyes. “And I’m not placing a bet either way.”

“Well, so far he seems well liked. There’s a lot of photos of him on site. Apparently he can drive a forklift. He’s got Cupcake working the finances side of it.”

“Who was jailed for embezzling.”

“Apparently he’s really, really good at finances. They have a website open now where you can look at project progress and see where the money’s going to the last penny. The transparency they’re modeling for this is actually pretty amazing.”

“So, we’re still looking at five to seven years?” Bruce asked, having already drained half his tea.

“Right. End of this year should see infrastructure to the city laid and foundations starting, and maybe one of the parking garages built, which would be advantageous to the workers actually.” Loki had his phone out, looking at files there. “It’s all guesswork. We have no idea how long it’s going to take to build the main facility because no one’s ever built one. We have decent schedules for the four arc reactors, provided major component completion happens as planned. The Bifrost itself? We just don’t know.”

“Doesn’t help that I have an entire facility elsewhere undergoing renovation to be able to make components for the Bifrost.” Tony admitted. “Wayne Enterprises is going to share some of that production space though, as well as arc reactor component manufacture.”

“How long did it take for Asgard to build their bifrost?” Bruce looked at Loki.

Loki blinked. “I wasn’t alive yet when it was originally constructed. The bifrost is old. The good news is, the repair work is done.”

“I noticed. Heimdall’s aim is immaculate, he matches the first etching on the balcony every single time.” Tony refilled their teas and poured himself coffee. “I suppose we could just call Hammer and ask him what the fuck he’s doing?”

“He’s going to ask why you aren’t reading the reports he sends in practically every business day.”
“He sends us reports every day?” Bruce blinked, and shuffled the display on his tablet when JARVIS helpfully brought them up.

“When did this become my job.” Loki sighed.

“Agent says you’d be a great spy if you weren’t unstable, per SHIELD.” Tony said helpfully.

“I’m still a great spy. I convinced Dr. Doom to use his words didn’t I?”

He considered whether that was diplomacy, or spying, and decided it wasn’t worth arguing. It was possible Loki didn’t see any appreciable difference. “So Reed has told me, though apparently he’s chosen to send them in Latverian, not English.”

“Ah, the fickleness of royalty.” Loki snickered. “Does Reed speak Latverian?”

“Well, apparently he’s learning whether he likes it or not.”

“Latverian? Holy shit, I wish him luck. I speak bits and pieces of a lot of languages and that’s one of those that sounds like it’s close enough to German to understand but no.” Clint said, coming in and leaning on the bar of the rumpus room. “Have you guys seen Phil?”

“No, not since yesterday.” Tony said after a moment, pouring coffee for Clint.

“Shit.” He sighed and accepted the coffee. “Thanks. Look, I think some shit’s going down. Sitwell’s going to be dropping by.”

“Is Sitwell one of the ones we like or not?” Loki wanted to know.

“He’s alright? Phil likes him. But, I dunno man. Didn’t like how the memo was worded.”

“You don’t like how any memo is worded unless it involves free food.” Phil observed, watching all
of them but Tony startle. Tony was facing him. “But, you’re actually right for once. JARVIS, can you have everyone come upstairs for a meeting? My orders have changed.”

“What do you mean, you’re leaving?”

Phil made a helpless gesture. “Just how it sounds. It’s technically Loki’s fault actually. Previously my age and injury helped secure my position here, now that I’m young again Fury wants me back in the field responding to issues there. I’ve long been basically the agent to respond to super humans or the different, it’s the opinion of command I’m more useful doing that.”

“I think the point is more that we liked having you here because we trust you.” Steve said slowly. “And especially framed against the conversation we recently had, I’m not thrilled with you being switched out for anyone.”

“I understand that, and I’m certain I’ll be recalled if anything serious happens.” He admitted. “I’m almost entirely certain that Fury has other motives too.”

“What’s actually going on?” Natasha wanted to know.

“Super soldier projects, non-government sanctioned. The one that’s starting to show up might have its roots in stolen AIM data, actually, and there may also be connections to a SHIELD project that is no longer happening.” His expression was a little pinched. “Fury wants me to follow some leads, uncover who’s bankrolling it and shut it down in entirety. Given my experience I’m arguably one of the best senior agents to lead such a response team. If it starts going pear shaped I might be calling you out to help contain it, but for now this is more of an investigation.”

The room was silent for a few minutes, the gathered Avengers looking at each other then back to Phil, who just looks back, expression somewhere between apologetic and resigned.

“For the record when I included you in the spell I didn’t think Fury would use it as an excuse to steal you away.” Loki sighed.

“Of course not, how could you have drawn that conclusion?”
“I think we’re accepting but none of us like it. In fact I’m pretty sure I hate it.” Tony shoved his hands in his pockets. “But I can’t exactly force you to stay. Just know I’ll be keeping tabs on you if I can. You matter and stuff.”

That made Phil smile, a bit ruefully. “I’ll make sure to tell everyone that Skynet’s friendly, at least where I’m concerned. Agent Sitwell will be standing in for me for non-emergency duties. Press concerns, missions, paperwork, all of those will go through him starting today. He has permission to use my office when he’s here, but not my apartment.”

“I’ll be staying on base locally if I have to.” Sitwell supplied.

“Because I’m assuming you’re not going to kick me out over this.” Phil added, looking at Tony.

“What, of course not, that’s stupid to even suggest.”

“So when are you leaving?” Clint wanted to know, arms crossed and looking by far the most put out about this change of events.

“Tomorrow morning, officially. I’d say I send updates but I’m certain Tony will keep everyone apprised of what I’m doing whether I like it or not.”

“I’m getting the distinct idea that classification levels are a suggestion around here.” Sitwell observed.

“I’ve never decrypted anything that Coulson sent out encrypted.” Tony gave Sitwell an irritated look.

“Be nice to JARVIS, Sitwell. It’s better than the other options.” Phil said at the same time.

“I’m too busy redirecting a hurricane to care what you honestly think about me, Agent Sitwell.” JARVIS replied loftily from the ceiling.

That made everyone look at Tony, who smiled sheepishly and shrugged wide. “New project, can’t give you details, if he wants to waste processing cycles to bat a hurricane around an ocean that’s on him.”
Phil rubbed his eyes. “Never pretend this is under your control it will only make it worse.” He grumbled to Sitwell. “It never is, it never will be, but they take suggestions.”

“Hey. About half of us listen great.” Steve said with dignity, prompting some snickering. “Alright, we’re sad to see you go, Phil. And if you are leaving tomorrow, maybe we should all have dinner together tonight?”

“Actually, I like that idea. Sure.” He nodded, smiling a bit.

“Okay, I can set that up. Italian, everyone in for Italian?” Tony looked around, pointing vaguely at everyone in turn until he got nods. “Italian. I’ll make some calls. Nothing too fancy, so well-kept casual wear okay. That means sleeves, Hawkass.”

“I feel singled out.” Clint pouted, and pouted further when Phil mussed his hair.

“Are you hiding in here?”

Loki looked up and shrugged a bit at Pepper. “I might be. Why?”

She tutted and stepped into his lab, getting behind him and running her fingers through his hair. “I miss Phil too but avoiding the new guy won’t make him go away.”

“It’s not exactly that. Coulson and I had an understanding, and most of SHIELD still doesn’t like me.” He sighed and tipped his head back, letting her tidy up his hair and start braiding it. “They have every reason to. I’ve been told in some very clear terms that they now measure damage and loss of life versus what I did during my, well. Conniption.”

“Interesting word choice.”

“Well, I knew you’d disapprove if I called it a rampage. That said it has been interesting to watch him try to convince Steve to move to DC.”
Sitwell had finally given up when Steve had said ‘no means no’ in a voice he usually reserved for
dressing down enemy that were already in handcuffs. So now they were apparently discussing
missions here, and Steve had flown out once for a day to meet up with a Strike Team.

“Your’re correct, I would have. I understand why you’re concerned, but basically the entire world
knows the details of your punishment now. If they’re holding grudges, it’s not on you.”

He sighed. “My dear, it’s very much on me and if the circumstances were reversed, well. It’d be a
mess.”

“It’s good you recognize that.”

Loki went still and slowly turned his head so Pepper could hold onto the strands securely, narrowing
his eyes. “Get out of my office.”

“I’m in the hallway.” Sitwell didn’t bat an eye, and didn’t look surprised when Loki flicked a hand
and the door slammed in his face.

“You could have probably handled that better.” Pepper said after a beat.

“Probably but what you’re doing is infinitely more important than anything he could have said to
me.” He opened a desk drawer and found a hair tie, offering it over his shoulder to her. “Priorities,
dear. I’ll deal with him after and we’ll establish some boundaries.”

“You know he’ll complain to Fury if he decides you’re being a brat.” She hummed, taking the hair
tie and using it. “It’s a mess, sorry, I don’t have a comb.”

“It hardly matters, it’s out of my face at least, thank you. As for Fury, I’m complying with any
number of rules he’s given me. I think I’ve earned the right to keep his people out of my space if I so
desire.” He stood off the computer chair and cracked his back, going and opening the door, not
surprised when he saw Sitwell still standing there patiently. “What do you want?”

He held up a folder. “I want to talk business. Here or somewhere else?”
“Here if you must.” He stood aside, letting Sitwell in and Pepper out in the process. “What made you decide to wait?”

“Coulson told me you’re like a cat. You need a time delay so it seems like your idea not someone else’s.” Sitwell handed him the folder. “So. How do you feel about solo missions?”

“How do you feel about not breaking up the Avengers? Because that certainly seems to be a common theme for you.” Loki countered, taking the folder.

“This has nothing to do with that. Collectively you’re a superweapon. A heavy hitter. That’s not always necessary, sometimes we need subtlety. A quieter approach.”

“Mhm. It was recently remarked to me that SHIELD would think me a fantastic spy if they didn’t consider me mad as a hatter.” He sat back down, opening the folder.

“It’s partly that and partly that you’re recognizable. You’re not exactly a supermodel, but the fact that you haven’t been approached by magazines for photo shoots is a mild surprise to most of SHIELD.”

He looked up and quirked an eyebrow, flipping gender as easy as an exhale. “Who says I haven’t?”

Sitwell to his credit didn’t bat an eye to the sudden change. “All that aside, you made some sort of progress with Doctor Doom. He may be doing it in the most annoying way possible but he trying to start a discourse instead of just attacking when he’s irritated. That’s a gold star for you. Between that, and your mystic abilities, you may be able to carry certain missions alone. Interested?”

“Well this is a lot of guff.” She handed the folder back. “Twaddle. So by all means, bottom line this for me. Non-combat I’m assuming, in the best cases.”

“Correct. This would be more along the lines of… socializing. Schmoozing, potentially procuring items. The attack in New York has let a lot of items of … extraterrestrial origins fall into civilian and collector hands. Some of it, we’ve conceded. Some of it’s too dangerous. You’d be going to ‘art’ auctions and social events to chat up owners and try to buy said things, and if that’s not possible, just acquire them through other means.”
“You think me a thief?”

“I think you’re whatever you need to be in the current span of minutes. And, since you’d be trying to procure items that are of … shall we say a volatile nature, it’s not a crime they can prosecute well.”

“So you’re saying, they’re unlikely to report these things as stolen goods. That makes me no less a thief. Not exactly an honorable position.” She considered. “But, parts of this seem intriguing. Certainly I’ve talked myself into and out of situations more dangerous than this in the past. Though this really does seem like work you’d give Natasha.”

“Romanov has done a fair share of this. It’s not her favorite thing, she’s not a social butterfly. You are.”

That made Loki laugh. “According to whom?”

He ignored the question. “Well, thank you for keeping an open mind in any event. When I get actual mission details I’ll sit down with you and give you a full brief before asking you to commit. Fair?”

“As fair a deal as I can get I suppose.”

“Good.” He nodded and turned, seeing himself out.

“Actually that’s an interesting plan they have.” Tony decided, considering his computer screens as he talked. “I’m guessing what’s happening here is they feel they have ‘underutilized assets’ so they’re trying to find ways to keep us busy. I’m being left alone and so is Bruce, for somewhat obvious reasons, but I guess they’re not willing to concede you’re doing enough work as my employee. Maybe. It’s hard to tell with SHIELD, I don’t get their reasoning on most things. Politics.”

“I can’t claim I see myself as a thief but it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve stolen something. Thor and I used to concoct plans to steal sweets and so on from the kitchens, and we really only escalated from there. I’m really the only reason he has any sleight of hand, I taught him it.” Loki was laying on the bed, watching Tony work upside down. “Is that a plane?”
“Yeah, it’s Coulson’s new digs. Big ass plane called a Globemaster. Looks like he’s got a little mixed team that’s going to be investigating a whole range of things for SHIELD.” He shifted so Loki could see the blueprints. “It’s basically a plane that can be lived on, in short sprints. Has stealth capabilities, vertical takeoff, the usual SHIELD bells and whistles. Oh, and it’s black with a giant eagle painted on the top of it, because of course it is.”

“And they just had it lying around?”

“They used to be used a lot more often, then someone got a wild idea about flying aircraft carriers. So they had a few parked and gave one to Phil.” He considered. “Fury’s got an angle here, I’m not sure what it is yet. Fine, what he has Coulson doing seems legit enough, but…”

“But you don’t trust him, or them.” Loki finished.

“You aren’t wrong. Sure, they’re better than some other options, but I can’t get past the whole ‘Let’s nuke Manhattan over enemies that can be killed with practical munitions’ thing. Yeah, I saw the breadth of the Chitauri force and a nuke finished that, but so would have some fighter jets and a few A10s, given enough time.”

“There are enemies that will not fall to the weapons of Midgard, but they are unlikely to come here. For a while, at least. Midgard has a reputation.” Loki rolled over.

“I actually have a subsidiary that does clean up after attacks. They handled most of the New York recovery. It’s expensive, but it’s positive press and I’ve gained some interesting insight from studying what we recover, and we’ve contracted out to other places, other situations.” Tony moved and sat next to him. “So I guess if they send you after that kind of stuff, you’re cleaning up what I couldn’t catch.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop if it happens.” He promised, leaning up to kiss Tony tenderly. “Honestly I’ve found myself rather liking the idea. My skills do need practice.”

“Hopefully they give you something interesting, then.”

“What do you take me for? If it is not fun, then I will make it fun.”

“Oh good lord.” He laughed, shaking his head. “This should be good.”
“I’m certain that it will be.”
Chapter 15

“Tony, your phone is ringing.” Loki didn’t look up from his bagel, putting slices of lox on it with scientific precision.

“Go ahead and grab it for me.” Tony was reading a Keurig box while waiting for his mug to fill.

He sighed and leaned, stretching to pick it up and considering it. “You set Phil’s ringtone as Man in Black?”

“Look, it’s like Fury being the Imperial March. If you have a better idea, I’m taking suggestions.”

“What’s my ringtone?”

“I’m shifting between various Marilyn Manson songs and are you going to answer that?”

Loki rolled his eyes and answered, lifting an eyebrow when it immediately went to video call and the person on the call was not Phil. Somewhat too female, and too Asian. “Well, unless something has drastically changed since I last saw him, you’re not Coulson.”

“And you’re not Tony Stark. That’s what this contact was listed as.” She seemed equally bewildered, and cringed and ducked down slightly at distant yelling.

“Ah. You’ve stolen Phil’s phone.” He’s more amused than he should be. “This is Tony’s phone. I answered for him, since apparently he hasn’t had enough coffee yet to bother.”

“Accurate.” Tony’s voice was muffled into his mug. “Who is it?”

“I honestly do not know.” Loki leaned and aimed the feed so Tony could look at it. “Who are you then? Not a SHIELD agent, they’re all scared shitless of him.”

“Ah, yeah, I kind of get why they are. You’re right, I’m not a SHIELD agent, he’s calling me a civilian contractor.” She blinked at them, then again when Loki took a bite of his bagel. “Tony Stark
“Tony Stark lives with, sleeps with, showers with and has breakfast with Loki, does that satisfy you?” He took another bite and snickered at her expression, trying to give Tony the phone and failing.

“He’s not lying.” Tony drained his coffee and looked at her. “Did you want anything in particular or oh hi Phil!”

Phil was not yet in evidence, however, the barrel of one of SHIELD’s icers very much was. “Phone. Now.”

“Ah, okay, okay…!” She passed the phone off gingerly.

He gave Loki and Tony a resigned look. “Kids. What can you do?”

“Kid? You’re the same age she is right now.” Tony snorted.

“Which is turning out to be a stunning pain in the ass. No one looks at me right now and treats me as the over-fifty level eight agent.” He was fuming.

“Well, you just have the element of surprise then.” Loki said once he’d swallowed. “So, you going to shoot her, or?”

“Don’t tempt me.” He hung up.

“Maybe he did mellow out with age.” Tony reflected.

“Yes, quite the little spitfire right now isn’t he? So who was she exactly?”

“Hell, I don’t know. ‘Civilian contractor’ is possible but the way she said it, not believing it.”
“Well she probably isn’t someone he’s fucking or we wouldn’t have gotten quite that exchange.” Loki considered thoughtfully. “She doesn’t seem his type given his previous preference for women who should have probably joined the Valkyries.”

Tony twitched, shook off, and shoved his mug back in the Keurig machine.

“So the Strike team is referring to this as my ‘Goth phase.’” Steve remarked, walking into the rumpus room from a quinjet still in his uniform. He’d stuck with the midnight blue and silver.

“They’re colorblind? That’s new.” Clint said, considering him. “I mean, even I know that’s blue.”

“And that’s way too patriotically themed to be goth. Goth usually has a sort of anarchy vibe going with it.” Natasha agreed. “Which Strike team was this? What leader?”

“Rumlow.” Steve set his shield aside, opening the top of his uniform. “Which, don’t get me wrong, he’s a talented guy. But goth, really?”

“I dunno, I could get into a goth Captain America. Or maybe a little emo phase. Mix it up a little, fuck with some Republican heads.” Pepper took his uniform top helpfully and put it on a hanger.

“I could be wrong but I don’t think I’d really, uh, carry black hair.” Steve was laughing, thanking Pepper before going to the bar and accepting a bowl of belated dinner from Bruce. “Thanks, seafood chowder?”

“Yeah, I was feeling lazy today.” Bruce agreed.

“Be lazy all you want.”

“I agree with you. You would look terrible with black hair; you don’t have the complexion for it.” Loki hummed.

He gestured at Loki with a spoon. “You barely do yourself since you got all the freckles in Malibu.”
“Ugh, don’t remind me. Curse this world’s star. Lesson hard learned.” He sighed. “So. What does SHIELD have you doing?”

“He is not allowed to talk about it.” Sitwell said, coming in carrying a file. “But, if you were wondering, it’s going exceptionally well so far.”

“He’s going to talk about it the moment you’re out of the room.” Clint said helpfully.

“No if he wants to keep his clearance levels.” He gave Clint the stink eye, not impressed when that got him flipped off.

“No one here believes for one femtosecond that you’re going to pull Captain America’s security clearances. So, that’s a completely empty threat.” Bruce told him. “Do you want some soup?”

“No. Thank you.” He held out the file until Steve signed something then snapped it closed. “I ate earlier. Thank you for offering.”

“Guys, it’s nothing exciting so far. We’re doing team exercises and so on. Unit cohesion stuff so I work well with the Strike teams.” Steve assured them. “Not sure why Sitwell’s so touchy about it.”

“Because they’re not all SHIELD personnel, so please, stop telling them SHIELD business.” Sitwell stalked back off.

“Hm. Touchy, but he’s not wrong.” Loki decided.

“Anything else going on?” Steve leaned on the bar, looking at everyone else.

“Small time trouble makers. We’re seeing some weapons in civilian bad guy hands that might have their basis in some tech they should not have, like, at all.” Tony told him. “Spiderman brought one to me, which is probably supposed to be in a police evidence locker somewhere. It’s a fascinating build, but very much a home brew and it’s a little concerning. It’s using Chitauri tech.”
“I can confirm that.” Loki agreed. “Though the way it’s using the tech is probably not at all how the Chitauri designed it.”

“And they’re using this tech to do what exactly?” He emptied the bowl and held it out to Bruce with both hands in a please-sir sort of gesture, and was ladled seconds.

“Shoot at each other, hold up banks, shoot at Spiderman. Usual bullshit.” Tony shrugged.

“Which is turning into a little soap opera because if they manage to escape Spiderman after shooting at him, they’re starting to run face first into Deadpool.” Clint added. “Which I don’t actually think Spiderman is all that thrilled about. Or the cops, probably, given they’re usually left with messes to clean up.”

“Oh good lord.” Steve rubbed his face. “Is it alright if I find that ridiculous?”

“We all do. It’s a ridiculous world.” Pepper told him.

“I can’t argue with that.”

“Sir, I’ve caught energy signatures that suggest the Bifrost is about to land on the balcony. Ten seconds until incoming.” JARVIS announced.

“Huh, did you hear anything from Thor?” Tony looked at Loki.

Loki shrugged open armed. “Obviously not, and he told me nothing of his next visit here. I had thought he’d been spending some time with Jane but I can’t say for certain.”

“That’s not Thor. That’s Sif.” Bruce said, peering as the Bifrost landed and resolved to show the figure standing there. “And Phil’s gone, that’s terrible timing.”

“No. No she’s in battle kit, something’s wrong.” Loki hopped off the bar stool and went to open the door, letting her see where it was since it was obvious she hadn’t quite expected to land on a balcony so high up. “Sif, what…”
She shoved in. “Thor bid I bring you home immediately. Asgard is under attack.”

He went still, staring at her. “Who’s the threat?”

“Malekith. The Dark Elves. There’s no time to waste.”

He rubbed his face and nodded. “Allow me a few minutes to go get into my armor.” He turned to leave and paused, looking at Bruce. “Bruce. I’m not sure what forces Asgard faces, but I’m certain it might be easier if we had a Hulk.”

Bruce blinked. “Yeah, sure, I’ll help. I’ve been sidelined for ages anyway, let me go get my Hulk pants on.”

“Thank you.” Loki nodded curtly then lunged into motion, running to the already waiting elevator and being taken down the lab level and the gear down without having to say a word to JARVIS.

Tony watched Bruce hurry away, stepping to the room on the rumpus room level that kept some uniform gear for the Avengers that didn’t use a geardown. “Well. Shit. How serious is this?” He looked at Sif and she shook her head.

“They’re an old enemy of Asgard, and of everyone. They desire to plunge the entire universe into darkness.”

He blinked. “Wait how would that even work. Even if you could somehow extinguish every sun that would just lead to…”

Pepper moved and put a finger to Tony’s lips. “That might not be literal.”

“It’s literal.” Sif replied.

“She’s an old enemy of Asgard, and of everyone. They desire to plunge the entire universe into darkness.”

He blinked. “Wait how would that even work. Even if you could somehow extinguish every sun that would just lead to…”

Pepper moved and put a finger to Tony’s lips. “That might not be literal.”

“It’s literal.” Sif replied.

“Why, why do bad guys always have such weird abstract goals? It’s never get rich or famous it’s oh, no I have plunge the universe into darkness because fuck all of you!” Clint tossed his hands up. “It’s
Sif blinked at him blankly the others just kind of nodded. “Should we come as well?” Steve asked after a beat.

“I was told to bring Loki home. I’m honestly not sure what he means by inviting Bruce Banner along.”

“Bruce kicked Loki’s ass before he was depowered. Trust me. You want Bruce along if you want a damaging force.”

There was an awkward silence, during which Bruce came out, in slip on shoes, Hulk-resistant pants and a shirt he’s willing to sacrifice, looking at them all expectantly. Then the elevator dinged and Loki strode out, Fenrir propped on his armored shoulder, sliding his enhanced glasses on as he moved. “Tony. Pepper.” They moved and he embraced them briefly. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. But I will be.” He left it at that and moved to join Sif, nodding to Bruce. Bruce followed and they stepped on the balcony, to where the Bifrost’s symbol was etched, Loki looking up. “Take us back.” He didn’t yell, just spoke in a tense voice, and the Bifrost lit up the balcony, taking the three with it.

“Well. Shit.” Clint said in the silence that followed.

“What the hell was that?” Sitwell came off the elevator. “Has Thor returned?”

They all looked at each other, and Tony sighed, hugging Pepper. “Who wants to tell him?”

The lab was shockingly silent.

It was jarring, honestly, and Tony look a slow walk through it, considering the change. He’d gotten used to having Bruce there, either sharing his immediate work space or in the next space over, their music sometimes clashing yeah but he’d never really minded. Bruce not being there had left a silent void, he’d grown used to the quieter man’s presence. And then Loki, usually a bit down the hall in his own workshop, his own music echoing up along with the semi-constant whir of some kind of machinery turning out parts for him.
All of that was currently shut down, leaving him standing alone in a half-dark lab level.

“…Well JARVIS, I guess this as good a time as any to finish some personal projects.” He rubbed his face. “Pull up any and all changes I was working on for the Iron Man armor. While we’re at it, show me where we are on the Iron Legion.”

“Certainly sir.” His work station populated with the files, photos and designs coming up in his holograph display. “While we’re discussing projects, I’ve successfully adjusted the path of two tropical storms and one category one hurricane. All are out over the ocean, of course, with no one at risk.”

“Good. Sounds like we have sound theory and we’ll be able to start the next stage soon. For now just keep an eye on storm warnings worldwide and try to turn anything intensely damaging back to sea.”

“Yes sir.”

“You take care of the world, I take care of the suit.”

“Of course, sir, already in motion. Do you want me to start prioritizing areas in need of weather repair?”

“Put it on the to-do list, let’s get a few other things dealt with first.” He started on the Iron Man armor, looking at previous issues noted, particularly temperature extremes and being able to survive space. JARVIS turned his music on without prompting and it was easy to sink into a familiar headspace, focusing on his goals and letting time drip away from him. He only paused because his music turned down and he looked up, the smell of food registering and smiling when he saw Steve standing there holding a takeout bag. “Wow. Been a while, hasn’t it.”

“Well, Loki usually makes you eat. He’s not here.” Steve stepped in, removing a takeout container and handing it to Tony. “And it’s amazing how much quieter the place is without him.”

Tony accepted the container. “Thank you. Probably doesn’t help that I’m a bit freaked out about this.”

“Well, your significant other just left, presumably to go to war for his home, and took one of your good friends with him. You’re allowed to be freaked out.” Steve claimed a chair, taking out another container for himself. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to go with.”

“I thought about it.” He admitted, opening his food and accepting a fork from Steve. “But, I’m not
sure I’m at a level where I’m effective fighting for Asgard. I know that Bruce is, and I know that Bruce will help protect Loki and Thor. Besides, if three team members had fucked off to Asgard for who knows how long I think Sitwell would have had a conniption.”

“You’re not wrong. He’s alright, but he’s not Phil.”

“Exactly. Yeah we’ll get used to him but I’d just as soon have Phil back.” He waved the fork vaguely. “Mostly because I actually trust Phil.”

He nodded. “I wanted to ask you, I think I made a friend in DC, would it bother you if I brought him by sometime?”

“Of course it won’t. They’ll have to stay out of the lab levels of course but your quarters and common areas, sure. Is this a SHIELD friend or a not-SHIELD friend?”

“Oh, not SHIELD. He works for the VA down there, ran into him while on a run.”

“Definitely welcome then. Wait, he didn’t keep up with you did he?”

Steve laughed softly. “He tried.”

“Good man, can’t wait to meet him. Make sure you give security his name so he can stop by as he wants.”

“So, can I ask, how serious was JARVIS when he said he was busy controlling a hurricane?”

“Entirely serious, he did that.” He paused, looking at Steve’s expression. “You want to know more about that?”

“You’re controlling the weather.”

“I’m working on disaster aversion, want to know more?”
“Yes, yes I do. I always do. Tell me more.”

On reflection, Loki isn’t shocked that he gets badly injured.

He’d been fighting sloppy. He hadn’t slept since Frigga’s funeral, and while he’d been smart enough to grab his meds and his phone (just so he’d hear the timer for the meds), it’s not enough. He’s been riding an edge of bright mania that he hasn’t felt in some time, rage and grief twisted up into blood lust, his entire being narrowing down to a few bright points of focus.

So it had been incredibly easy to ignore anything resembling an order from Odin, and getting off Asgard was even easier (if messy), but of course the plan goes sideways. Even with the enemy clearly not expecting someone or something like the Hulk coming at them, Malekith still won, escaping with the Aether and leaving Loki in a pool of blood.

He blinked, shaking his head a bit at a dull beep in his ears before his vision resolved enough to focus on his glasses, and everything help him he laughs bitterly because his glasses are displaying alarms in do-something-right-fucking-now red, showing the armor chestpiece and the damage it had taken, and the words ‘life threatening injury’ in big flashing letters. The laughter cut off into a gasp because the armor moved around him, suddenly warming and tightening.

Of course. Tony had said it could potentially save his life. It was trying to put pressure on, and counter shock. Which was more than Thor was doing at the moment, who had just fallen to his knees next to him.

“Loki. Loki, look at me.”

“I’m not dead yet.” He gritted out. “But I will be if you don’t do something, you absolute fool.” Thor rocked back a bit before he was bodily moved by the Hulk, who leaned down and squinted at Loki, and the blood leaking between the fingers of the hand Loki had pressed into the wound. Loki looked back, honestly not sure what to make of this before Hulk slid his arms under him and scooped him up, making Loki howl in pain. “Gentle! Gently!”

The Hulk only snorted, looking around before taking off running, leaving Loki to hold on and barely able to ask what the fuck as they ducked into a cave system. Then he saw the portal, and could only brace as the Hulk leapt through it. The air changed, and he had a dim glimpse of a warehouse before
the Hulk broke through a door with his shoulder, standing outside still holding Loki but seeming a
touch unclear on his next action.

“SIR! Loki, sir, can you hear me?”

He winced, managing to lift a hand to adjust an earpiece. “JARVIS. Yes. Doctor. Where?”

There was a long silence, then JARVIS’ voice started sounding off from Loki’s phone, still in an
inner chest pocket of the jacket. “Doctor Banner, can you hear me?”

“No Banner.” Hulk scowled, leaning and tipping his head to listen to the voice emanating from
Loki’s chest.

“Understood. Hulk, listen to me. Loki needs a doctor.”

“Hulk take him.”

“Good. Very good. Can I tell you where to take him?”

“Hulk listen.”

“Since when do you talk?” Loki wanted to know, hugging his midsection and shaking, then hissing
when two sharp spikes dug into his neck. “What was that?”

“Adrenaline, Mr. Laufeyson, I will let Mr. Stark know your armor is depleting its reserves. Hulk,
turn to your left. See that road? Follow it. Run.”

Tony’s ring was glowing.

He stood in the rumpus room with the chain dangling from his hand, watching the emerald weakly
glow and pulse, and occasionally spin in a mad circle, tug one way then the next. “This cannot be good.”

“Is that something Loki did to it?” Clint wanted to know, sitting on the bar and watching Tony shift position, moving the ring around in midair.

“I have to figure. He never told me anything but he never does.” Tony admitted. “He says his magic isn’t for my eyes.”

“I’m alright with you not knowing any magic, honestly.”

“Tony!” Pepper got off the elevator, holding up her ring on the chain, which was doing the same thing. “What happened?”

“I honestly don’t know.” He said, then stopped when the ring dropped limp for a moment before whipping around, abruptly tugging east and glowing again. “Shit.”

“Sir, I have made contact with Mr. Laufeyson’s armor. He is in east London and he is badly injured.”

“What? How badly?”

Pepper had walked up even with Tony and held up her ring next to his, watching as they both tugged hard in the same direction. “Oh my god, it’s a homing beacon. London is east of us across the ocean.”

“Give me a moment sir, downloading data from his armor now and attempting to make contact with his glasses.”

“Yeah, call a soft assemble while you do that. Non-emergency.” Tony said, and a split second later the lighting changed, yellow alert lights kicking on and an alert being sent to the Avengers’ phones. A few seconds after that one of the holograph projections kicked in, showing the details of Loki’s chest piece with the damage highlighted and injuries starting to scroll. “Oh. Oh fuck.”
“Appears to be a stab wound, sir. Bladed weapon, not small. No bones hit. Organs hit, blood loss continuing despite the efforts of the armor. The adrenaline was just used.”

He stared at the information, hand to his mouth, Pepper in much the same pose. “He’s alive.”

“Yes, though staying that way requires immediate medical attention. He is currently en route to a major hospital in London.”

“Okay. Okay that’s, that’s a start, how’s he getting there?”

“The Hulk is carrying him, sir, and might be making the fastest cross-London trip in recent memory that didn’t require a helicopter or plane.”

“What’s going on?” Sitwell entered the rumpus room, Steve and Natasha right behind him.

“Loki’s in London with life threatening injuries. The Hulk is with him. We know nothing else.” Clint told them.

“So, I’m going to London.” Tony said with utter finality.

Sitwell blinked, moving to look at the holograph and clearly parsing this information. “Why bring him here for medical attention instead of Asgard?”

“We don’t know.” Clint made exasperated gestures. “Seriously, I told you the sum total of our intel at the moment.”

“Is Loki talking?” Tony asked.

“Not well, sir. He’s in a lot of pain and struggling to stay awake. I’m talking to him to try to keep him focused.” JARVIS paused. “He says ‘Malekith has the Aether.’”

“What?” He blinked.
Clint lifted a hand. “Big bad has a weapon. Guaranteed.”

Sitwell looked at them. “Alright, everyone. Assemble. I’m calling for a quinjet and permission to enter England.” The Avengers scattered, Tony putting his ring back on and holding Pepper for a moment before running to the gear down on the balcony.

Pepper watched him go, then put her own ring back on, letting it tug on its chain against her neck while looking at Sitwell. “I’m going with you.”

“Miss Potts, you’re not an Avenger.”

She stepped up close to him, orange crackles coming in around her temples as she leaned in. “Loki is hurt. I am going with you.”

He leaned back slightly. “…Understood. Have your passport ready by the time we leave.”

She nodded curtly, and went to get it.

“You need to look for an entrance marked ‘Emergency’…”

“Hulk found.” Skidding to a halt had done some damage to the road and sidewalk, and he walked up and considered the large doors before they opened automatically. He huffed and ducked through the doorway, ignoring the suddenly silent ward as he thumped in, still cradling Loki.

The nurses at the desk were frozen, which was understandable. The Hulk’s head just about brushed the ceiling, and he was covered in blood, Loki’s body ridiculously small in comparison. Then Loki lifted a blood covered hand for attention. “I am dying, so if you would kindly?”

That was enough that the ward sprang into motion, one getting on a phone and paging for doctors and a rolling stretcher being brought. The Hulk waited patiently, watching all this activity and somewhat gently shifting Loki to the stretcher before reaching and removing Loki’s glasses with two
“What?” Loki wanted to know, before looking at the doctors who had arrived and were staring at the multiple layers of armor and leather between them and their patient.

“Banner.” Hulk sat, looking at him. “Will wait.”

“Am I speaking to doctors now?” JARVIS wanted to know from the phone, making them look for the source before one fished in Loki’s pocket and stared at the phone. “Yes, hello. He’s in combat armor. I can talk you through removing it in the most efficient way possible and give you previous medical history that I am aware of. When that’s done please return this phone to Doctor Banner.”

“Alright start talking.” The doctor put the phone on Loki’s chest and set about following the directions even as they move, finding the described emergency releases and starting to peel Loki out of the gear as they moved for an operating theater.

The Hulk sat for a moment, then looked over his shoulder when the doors of ER opened again, Thor coming in and setting Jane down. Jane was clutching Fenrir in both hands. “Where is my brother?”

“Doctors. Banner come back now.” Hulk bowed his head and curled in on himself, body distorting and shrinking, leaving Bruce sitting on the floor blinking, holding Loki’s glasses in one hand, staring at them before looking up at the front desk of ER. “Where am I?”

“London. You’re in London.” Jane came over and offered her hands down as Thor did, helping him up.

“...Whose blood am I covered in?” He wanted to know, voice very small as he looked at himself.

“Loki’s. You brought him to a hospital. You very probably just saved my brother’s life.” Thor beamed and punched his shoulder.

“Oh. Okay.” It was very clearly not okay with Bruce.

“Are you Thor Odinson?” A doctor came back out, and Thor looked up. “Come with me. We need
to blood type you immediately. The man on the phone says we can’t source donated blood for your brother, only plasma, and that you’re his closest relative.”

“He’s adopted.” Thor blinked. “But tell me where you need to go and I will.”

“Adopted. So you two aren’t blood related?”

“No. We aren’t even the same species, technically. I’m of Asgard and he’s Jotun.”

The doctor blinked, and looked at Bruce, who was still standing there awkwardly, only in Hulk pants. “Different planets.” He said helpfully.

“You need a blood relative?” Thor wanted to know.

“He’s lost a lot of blood and is still losing blood. We’re doing what we can and we already have an IV giving him plasma, but his chances of survival are going to improve drastically if we can give him blood.”

“This is something we should have figured out months ago.” Bruce groaned, almost rubbing his face then seeing his hands were also covered in blood.

“He has children. Would they be able to share blood with him?”

“It’s actually possible? He’s outside our blood typing system so I can only assume that…”

“I shall fetch them. Have your tools ready when I arrive.” Thor turned and ran, darting out the doors and raising Mjolnir. A few seconds later, the bifrost hit and he was gone, leaving a screaming cacophony of car alarms echoing through the parking lot.

“Oh. Oh boy. That’s Sleipnir and Fenrir isn’t it.” Jane said after a beat.

“I mean, if this is at all right they’ll be able to give him enough blood to refill him twice over.” Bruce pointed out, then looked helplessly at the doctor. “I realize this is not your job, but can I please use a
shower and borrow some scrubs.”

“You’re not a patient but I think we can make an exception, come on. I’ll have a nurse take you to a shower.” The doctor nodded and gestured for Bruce to follow her, leaving Jane standing in ER, holding Loki’s staff.

“Any updates?” It’s far from the first time Tony’s flown the Iron Man armor over the ocean. It’s not a long flight by commercial jet, and even shorter by Iron Man armor, but that still meant he had almost five hours before he made a landing in London. And the quinjet was going to be at least half an hour behind him.

“Loki is officially in surgery, sir. He’s successfully been put into anesthesia and intubated. They did have to cut apart the upper pieces of his armor to get it off without injuring him further, but everything has been set aside on my request. His medicine’s been set aside as well. Dr. Banner has Loki’s glasses, but until the phone’s returned to him I have no real way to contact those.”

“Do we know anything further about how this happened?”

“I have made contact with Selvig, but I’m struggling a bit to follow his concerns. Apparently, the nine realms are going to somehow line up with one another, which will allow gateways to open. Malekith, who seems to be the ‘big bad’ in play, is going to somehow use this to his advantage.”

“The bring darkness to the entire universe thing.”

“Potentially sir.”

“The universe needs less lame villains.”

“…Does it really, sir?”

“I’m just saying, they need goals that make sense.”

“Quite. Like controlling the weather?”
“Don’t you start.” He adjusted heading, watching commercial flights pass below him. “So, we know basically nothing, but reading between the lines. Malekith is an old foe of Asgard, needed a weapon to go about his goal of shutting off the lights on an intergalactic level, and decided attacking Asgard as hello first was a good idea?”

“Perhaps Dr. Banner can clarify sir, he’s calling you.”

“Put him through.” There was a pause then video popped up, Bruce facetiming him. “Bruce! Are you alright?”

“Yes, now that I’ve cleaned up a bit. I can’t remember much but Jane Foster’s here, she can give you some idea of what happened.” He shifted the camera, showing Jane sitting next to him.

“Well hit me with it, I’m flying across an ocean and have nothing but time to listen.”

The car alarms screamed again when Thor returned, looking back and forth between Fenrir and Sleipnir. “Now, I know I’m not your parent and you tend to disobey me just for that reason. But this is a place for sick Midgardians, and many may find you both rather frightening. So, for Loki’s sake, behave yourselves.”

They both looked back before looking around at what was, to them, a very strange environment. But, the other parties along for the journey, two healers from the palace, were doing the exact same thing. “This is Midgard?”

“Aye, this is London.” Thor was already walking at a quick pace toward the doors of ER, and Sleipnir and Fenrir followed, both ducking to clear the doorway, Sleipnir’s hooves a loud racket on the hard floor and the others in ER stifling loud exclamations at the sight. The healers followed, both carrying bags they’d hurriedly assembled when Thor had come in all but shouting what had happened.

The nurse at the desk already looked completely done with this situation, and settled on silently staring at Thor, waiting for anything resembling an explanation and steadfastly ignoring the gigantic animals leaning over his shoulders.
“You have my brother Loki in surgery. One of your doctors says he needs blood, from a relative. Call that doctor here, now.” Thor gestured. “I have brought his children, as well as two healers from Asgard. I would like the healers to join the doctors in surgery, and his children are here to give blood.”

“We can’t just let anyone into our surgical suites. We don’t know their qualifications; we don’t know who they are.”

“You have a crown prince of Asgard in one of your carpentry shops you refer to as medical care.” One of the healers stepped forward. “We are here to help. Let us.”

He groaned and rubbed his eyes before reaching for the phone, starting to page related doctors, because he’s not making these decisions.

“Why that horse got eight legs?” One of the patients waiting in ER asked, and was soundly ignored.

Jane and Bruce stepped through the doors, having heard the bifrost echo from where they’d been in the waiting area for surgery. “Tony’s on his way but he won’t be here for hours.” Bruce told him.

“We have more pressing concerns.” Thor gestured at the desk. “Like getting them to understand.”

The doctor that had asked Thor for donated blood arrived with a phlebotomist and paused, taking this scene in. “Right then, so the Norse legends have some roots in truth. That’s Sleipnir, right? And Fenrir?”

“They can understand you just as well as I can. They just can’t speak your language. So feel free to address them like you would myself.” Thor told her.

She frowned. “We can’t put them on the elevators and we have to limit their travel path for contamination concerns…” This was muttered, then she focused again, looking at the group. “Sleipnir, Fenrir, we’re going to put you in a currently not being used surgery theater while we test your blood. That’s also where we’ll take donations if either of you can. It’s not a lot of room for your relative sizes but it’s the best I can do, so be careful not to bump equipment. Understood?” When they nodded, she looked at the two healers and their mode of dress. “Are you doctors from Asgard?”

“Healers, yes.”
“Good enough. All of you follow me, the faster we get this done the faster we have something resembling order here again.”
Bruce stared at him, chewing, before almost laughing, shaking his head. “You’re fantastic. I have a terrible Hulkover.”

“Yeah, I can tell. But you saved his life man. I owe you. Go get some sleep. It’s the hotel that’s in the middle of the road. Walk out of ER and turn left, you’ll figure it out.” He watched Bruce nod and stand, watching him go and settling in to wait. That’s how the healers from Asgard found him most of an hour later, slouched with coffee from the nurse’s station at hand, reading Selvig’s research on his phone and wondering at how psychotic the universe seems to be. They didn’t seem to be expecting him, though. “I sent Bruce to get some rest. I’m Tony Stark. Loki lives with me.”

“Ah, his Highness told us to expect you.” One said, nodding. “The crown prince will heal, but it will take time. Once he wakes we urge you to bring him back to Asgard, we will be able to hurry the process there. We have left some of our potions with the doctors here with instructions. They will help.”

He stood and walked to them. “Thank you. I don’t know if I can ever pay you back for what you’ve done today.”

“You don’t need to. We are glad to serve in this capacity. Asgard needs him, whatever he may believe. We all know he’s what tempers the future king.”

He blinked twice and filed that away for later. “Okay. Are you two leaving now?”

“We are. We’ll ask the prince’s children to return with us but they may choose to linger.” They bowed slightly and stepped back out, one nurse leading them away and another gesturing for Tony to follow.

“This isn’t exactly in normal visitation rules, but everything seems out the window right now.” The nurse told Tony. “He’s been moved to a room for recovery, you can sit with him there.”

“Yes, please. More of my friends are coming, soon.” He grabbed the staff and followed.

“We don’t need a crowd in with him. He had a very close call.”

“Yeah, I get you.” He stepped into the hospital room and stopped, staggering a little at Loki on the bed, no longer intubated but on a nasal cannula, pale and oh so slowly breathing.
“We were told that what he was wearing has value, and may even be dangerous if damaged. A good bit of it is soaked in his blood, though, and should be disposed of if you can. Can we just give that to you?”

“Yeah, yeah you can. I made it for him anyway. It’s only dangerous if the power pack is damaged.” He pulled a chair over and sat heavily, lacing both of his hands around one of Loki’s. “Thank you.” He didn’t really notice the nurse leave, looking at Loki’s sleeping face. “Clever trick, with the rings. I’m going to ask you about that once you’re able to answer. Jane seems to think you’re a big damn hero now. I just want you to know that only counts if you live, otherwise you’re a big damn idiot.” He sat back, moving one hand to rub his burning eyes, unable to put any real heat in his words. He’s just waiting, at this point, for everyone including Loki.
Chapter 16

JARVIS largely considered social media to be curiously double-edged. Useful, certainly, sometimes very good at making certain entities accountable for their actions, but also very good at spreading information around that really, really shouldn’t be.

The Hulk’s cross-London run to bring Loki to medical care had been very, very public.

While not many had gotten good photos, people commented on various media as the Hulk ran by them, doing blessedly little damage as he went. There was plenty of blurred footage of him running by, clearly carrying someone. He’d had to stop at an intersection at one point and listen to directions, and that was where a few very good photos had been taken.

The Hulk, head bowed and tipped slightly as he listened to JARVIS talk through the phone, Loki gesturing with one hand, both of them very clearly covered in blood.

By the time Tony had landed at the hospital the pictures had worked through the internet like wildfire, spreading from London at an exponential rate as twitter users with large follower counts grabbed and passed them on.

JARVIS had a twitter account, named AvengersAdmin, with the byline of ‘you don’t want my job.’ No ‘real names’ attached. Most seemed to assume it was a twitter used by some kind of public-relations department, as the user never seemed to sleep (well, obviously not). He used it to disperse press releases and post his weekly youtube music videos, and retweet the various official Avenger twitters. So as the photo of the Hulk and Loki started going around, people started tagging him asking what was going on.

By the time Loki was officially out of surgery, it was a very large amount of people, in a wide variety of languages, and some journalists had picked up on it and were also trying to get him to comment.

There was no getting rid of the photos, and Phil wasn’t around, and Sitwell hadn’t taken clear control of media spin yet. So he responded, clarifying first that little is known as to the actual circumstance of the injury. However, he can confirm Loki is severely injured, has survived surgery, and any prognosis at this point is at best guarded.

A conservative response, he thought. No lies, nothing he’d have to walk back, plenty of room to
clarify as he got information he felt confident in releasing.

Of course, by remarking on it, he made it the nightly news.

He offered no further comment and turned down all requests for in-person interviews (obviously).

The quinjet and the Avengers were not really made for London.

JARVIS had politely informed them that Bruce had checked into a hotel and was presumably sleeping. Tony was holding vigil over Loki. Thor and Jane had gone to meet with Darcy and Selvig, presumably to try to figure out how much time they had before the Big Bad showed up, if he was showing up here (Selvig seemed to think that was the case).

Sitwell wanted to let Pepper off in the park by the hospital because it was as close as they could get and as it was they had the stealth on the quinjet to try to quietly avoid notice, what with breaking so many aviation regulations at once. Steve wanted everyone to get off there so they could get an in-person update on Loki’s condition.

So everyone got off and left the quinjet in the park, and Sitwell didn’t bother trying to hide his frustration about it.

“This is team business. He’s hurt, we’re checking on him.” Steve was using his Captain America voice.

“Which wouldn’t do anything to change his condition. If he’s as hurt as they’re saying they’re not going to even let you into the room.” Sitwell fumed.

“Maybe. Selvig can wait ten minutes.” He opened the ramp on the quinjet and walked out, putting his shield on his back, everyone following before he paused. “Is that Sleipnir?”

“It is. Loki needed blood.” Pepper jogged past him to where Sleipnir was standing watching them, Fenrir rolling to his feet to also watch. In the relative dark of the park, the city lights around made the scene eerie because it was quite clear just how large, and how abnormal, both these creatures were.
Hilariously someone had put up a border of cones and police tape around them, which was potentially one of the most British things she’d ever seen. There were also two large buckets and a haphazard pile of hay, all of which had a ‘you stay right there then!’ attitude to it. “Hey stepkids.”

“We’re going to owe the local cops money aren’t we. Or something.” Clint observed, walking behind her.

“We’ll figure it out. Tony has a whole department who works to undo mission damage.” Pepper patted Sleipnir’s neck before scratching through the fur on Fenrir’s neck. “I’ll go see about your parent and report back, okay? Anything at all happens, I promise I’ll come tell you.”

“They probably shouldn’t be in public like this.” Sitwell took a photo with his phone and sent it back to Fury.

“Everyone’s just doing what you did, but sending it to facebook or twitter. JARVIS is keeping track of it. They’re being left alone.”

“Probably helps that either of them could eat a human in about three bites.” Clint supplied, then guffawed when both Sleipnir and Fenrir went into some very over the top gagging and vomiting noises.

“Do we actually have a plan?” Natasha asked as they left the park, crossing the street toward the hospital.

“I’ll call Selvig, find out if they’re still awake and when and where we should meet them.” Sitwell decided. “Whatever’s coming we should be rested to face it. Stark got us all hotel rooms, which was good of him, we don’t have any sort of base here where we could crash until morning.”

“While you hash that out we’ll go talk to Tony, and report back to you.” Steve told him. Sitwell nodded and split from the group, returning to the park to stand by the mostly-hiding quinjet and pretend that Fenrir and Sleipnir weren’t staring at him.

The hospital was actually rather quiet, the emergency ward currently empty, but the nurse on the desk looked entirely done the moment they walked in. Still, she didn’t even question it, just told them they had the wrong ward and gave directions on the easiest way for them to get to ICU and the waiting room there. Following those directions got them to ICU’s desk, where the nurses didn’t bat an eye, just fetched Tony.
“I am so glad to see you guys. Really.” Tony said as he came down the hallway, hugging Pepper and looking at Steve, Clint and Natasha. “He’s still alive. I don’t know what else I can say.”

“You can bottom line it for us. What’s his chance of survival?” Steve replied, calm and patient.

“Really hard to say. Probably pretty good, but that’s if he doesn’t have any infections.” Tony rubbed his face. “Thor brought some healers from Asgard and apparently they had enough supplies with them to patch up the organ damage, which between that and the blood transfusion cleared the worst of it in theory. The next forty-eight hours will tell us a lot.”

“Shit.” Clint said with some feeling. “Is the asshole who did it still alive?”

“That guy, no. That guy’s boss, yes. Thor and Jane can tell you a lot more about that.” Tony took a slow breath. “If he actually takes enough time to really heal he’s out of action at least six months and a good bit of that’s going to be therapy, physical and otherwise. Loki’s tough as adamantium but he’s not immortal right now. Or, well. Not as tough as he used to be.”

“So we’re dealing with bad guys that know how to kill Asgardians, which are tougher than most humans.” Clint said after a beat. “Might be an interesting fight.”

“Thor might be able to handle the big bad if we can handle any forces he brings with him.” Tony told him, and that got nods. “I’m going to stay here. I have my phone, so if you all start talking strategy call me to keep me in the loop.”

“I figured.” Steve patted his shoulder. “Keep us informed.”

“I’ll try. I’ll text you all the hotel information.” He kept ahold of Pepper and watched them go, sighing. “This is a mess.”

“How is he, really?” Pepper asked softly, and let herself be led back down the hall, staring in the doorway at Loki and the equipment lined up along one side of the bed. The room was large enough to accommodate the second bed that had been pulled in, which had a pair of cell phones on it and Loki’s staff. “Did you ask for the second bed?”
“Yeah. I’m not leaving until I have to, and that’s to punch the guy responsible for this in the dick.” Tony led her in and sat on the empty bed, reaching out to take one of Loki’s limp hands. “He’ll be okay. I have to believe that. He got here, and got help, he’ll be okay.”

She sat by him and added her hand to his, other arm wrapping around him.

Tony was trying to pay attention to the conversation, he really was. They were all standing at the University of Greenwich around Selvig, who had a tablet computer and was trying to explain how he’d come to all his conclusions. Frankly, Selvig sounded extraordinarily off balance and had already been sharply reprimanded by Thor once for speaking ill of Loki. The bad blood there was understandable, Selvig had zero reason to like Loki even now, but it was in slightly poor taste.

The Iron Man armor was standing passively beside him, and he ended up looking around, at the college then considering what he’d seen on his short flight from the hospital to here. “Okay. Wait a second.” He interrupted, and everyone looked at him. “How old is this place?”


“1890, sir.” JARVIS told him through the Iron Man armor. “However, the observatory is much older. The observatory was commissioned by King Charles II in 1675.”


“We simply can’t. It’s happening here.” Selvig blustered. “I can’t just pick up and move nine dimensions, or planets, or however we care to refer to them. They’re lining up with this place.”

Tony put his face in his hands.

“Okay. That’s actually a very good concern. The observatory is older than our country, and is probably priceless.” Sitwell reflected.

“The difference between Europe and America. America thinks a hundred years is a long time, and Europe thinks a hundred miles is a long distance.” Darcy nodded.
“So. We have no control over their arrival but we can try to control the battlefield once they do.” Steve said. “So we need to try to do that. We need to keep them in the green spaces and keep them away from the buildings. The faster we shut this down, the better.”

“The convergence will take as long as it takes. Which shouldn’t be for very long.” Selvig admitted. “The convergence isn’t Malekith’s doing, it’s just happenstance, like the planets of our solar system lining up.”

“He’s just meaning to take advantage of it.” Thor said, tossing Mjolnir up and down in one hand. “The portals will let him wreak havoc much more effectively. If he releases the aether at this place he may even manage his goal of spreading darkness.”

“Lame goal. Incredibly lame goal.” Tony muttered into his hands before dropping them, finally.

“Think of it less like darkness and more like a circumstance that will allow his people to gain battlefield advantage.” Natasha told him.

“So what do these things do?” Clint was considering a very fancy looking device Selvig had brought along.

“Well, if I have the theory of it right, it should allow us to control the convergence just a bit. Limit the distort field of it, maybe even stabilize the portals. If it works very well, we may even be able to kick Malekith through one of them. Keep him busy.” Jane said. “If he needs to be here for it to work, keeping him not-here until the convergence is over will stop his plan.”

“So we have to keep him busy, but he’s strong enough to beat up Asgardians.” Steve looked at Bruce. “How would the Hulk feel about baseball throwing Malekith through some portals?”

Bruce considered. “Actually he might like that a lot, but you’ll need to remind him to stay here. He hates that guy.”

“It’s unlikely he will come alone. As the convergence continues, it’s very likely the enemy will continue to arrive.” Thor rubbed his chin. “If we split up, we can keep Selvig’s devices protected and the enemy hemmed in.”
“Alright the more we talk about this the more it sounds doable.” Steve nodded, and looked to Sitwell. “I’m not sure what our authority is here honestly. Can we get this place evacuated?”

Sitwell sighed. “It’ll be hell to pay if we’re wrong but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Good man. No sense in waiting, let’s get these things set up.”

Pepper knew the convergence was starting for a few reasons. The first one was Tony sent her a text saying ‘shit’s about to go down but we’re as prepared as we can be.’ The second was the sky outside the window got very, very strange, and she could hear voices echoing down the hall of the hospital, nurses and doctors calling each other, patients calling nurses, all rather concerned about what was going on east of them.

The last was Loki jerked awake with a gasp. “Thor! Malekith..!” He didn’t get any further, trying to lever himself up off the bed and keening in pain before falling back.

“Loki!” She moved from the window to his bedside, taking one of his hands and hitting the nurse page button. “Loki, don’t try to get up.”

He blinked, staring at the ceiling, a fine sweat suddenly visible across his temples. “That wasn’t pleasant.” He turned his head, squeezing her hand. “Hello. Have I been out long?”

“No. Not actually very long, about a day and you were in surgery for a good bit of it.” She smiled and squeezed back as nurses came in.

“I’m in London yes?” He swallowed roughly, looking to the nurses as one checked his eyes before checking vitals.

“Yes. You’re in Saint Thomas Hospital in London.” One of the nurses confirmed in a gentle voice. “And we’re surprised to see you awake so quickly.”

“What’s the extent of the injury?” He kept Pepper’s hand, watching as they brought medicine out. “Nothing in the IV to put me under please, not yet.”
“Not as much as it could be. If not for the doctors from your own world, you likely would have lost a kidney and a few inches of intestine at the very least.” A doctor came in, holding up a bottle then handing it to Loki. “They asked us to give this to you when you…”

Loki looked at it, broke the seal, and upended it, chugging it down then coughing violently after.

“Woke up.” The doctor finished, accepting the empty bottle back. “Well then, how was that?”

“Vile. Can I have some water please?” He visibly gagged.

Pepper didn’t bother trying to stop her laughter. After a few moments of consideration, the doctor agreed to let Loki sit up slightly in the adjustable hospital bed, and got him a cup of cool water and his prescription medication. He took the latter without comment then sipped the water, looking at them all.

“A battle rages outside, somewhere nearby.” He told Pepper.

“Tony texted me and told me it was about to happen.”

He nodded. “Malekith is here. And I am here, unable to help.”

“Your main concern right now is healing. You’re quite lucky to be alive.” The doctor told him, looking at the vitals the nurse had taken. “You’re going to be bedridden or near it for a while yet. I’m not willing to make any real time estimates, since you’re not quite like us.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Was that that noticeable in surgery?”

“No, they actually wrote in a ‘species’ line on your chart in pen.” He turned the chart to show him. “Jotun, apparently!”

Loki blinked, then dissolved into laughter that was interrupted, though not fully stopped, with noises of discomfort.
“Well. That’s big.” Steve said as Malekith’s ship ground to a halt in the center of the courtyard.

“It’s probably about the size of those giant flying creatures the Chitauri had, just less wiggly.” Bruce decided, back in his (much more clean, for now) Hulk pants and watching this with intense curiosity. “Well, it could be larger actually. It’s difficult to tell mass.”

“Hey Sitwell, are you glad we evacuated?” Clint asked, pulling two arrows. “What’s our plan of attack?”

“The ship isn’t the real threat.” Thor fiddled with his earpiece, already walking toward the ship. “Malekith is.”

“Wait, can we keep that?” Tony wanted to know.

“If you can steal it from him, Man of Iron, you have my blessing.”

“Awesome. Guys, dibs on the ship, I have a space program to revolutionize.”

“Stark, you can’t just call dibs on an alien spacecraft.” Sitwell said, sounding tense.

“Too late. Called dibs. It’s mine.”

“Big bad brought friends!” Clint said cheerfully. “No, wait, shit. He brought Cybermen from Dr. Who!”

“They are dark elves.” Thor said before starting shit with Malekith.

“Well they look like Cybermen.”
“Actually yeah they totally do.” Darcy supplied, peeking out a window of the university before ducking and checking the tablet for the device feeds. “Give us a few minutes on this guys.”

“I think we can manage a few minutes.” Steve threw his shield, and it pinged between several of the dark elves, knocking them off their feet as it went. That was enough of a signal and Clint opened fire, the first arrows not clearing that far past the armor, but there’s wide enough armor gaps that he just aimed for those instead. Tony looped around the spaceship and landed by Steve as Natasha ran in, easily working their way through the enemy.

“Banner!” Thor yelled, and Bruce didn’t bother taking off the scrub top he was still wearing, running and shifting to Hulk mid-stride. He sent the enemy flying on either side of him like bowling pins, skidding up and grabbing Malekith, spinning and throwing him through one of the portals. “Good!” Thor shouted, then spun Mjolnir and followed Malekith.

“Was that part of the plan?” Clint asked after a beat.

“Try to keep track of which one he went through.” Steve replied, resigned.

That ended up being a task easier said than done, because Malekith and Thor were in and out of portals rapidfire. Clint ended up calling out the relative color of the portal they’d just gone into because he had no other easy way to designate them. The dark elves themselves apparently hadn’t been expecting this kind of resistance, and while not pushovers they weren’t actively regenerating or made of lava, so compared to the fight with AIM, it went fairly quickly.

“The portals are starting to close.” Selvig announced over the radio.

“And none too soon.” Thor was cheerful as Malekith came back through one, only to get grabbed by the Hulk and stared at contemplatively. Thor was right behind him, the portal closing behind him.

“I thought we didn’t want him here.” Natasha said, staring at this. The few dark elves still fighting also stopped, everyone looking at this just in time for Malekith to release the Aether.

And the Hulk took it, dropping Malekith to wad the Aether up into a ball and look at Thor expectantly. The Aether did not appear happy about this, but the Hulk kept wadding it back up.

“You cannot stop this! This is my destiny!” Malekith screamed up at the Hulk, and was ignored.
“I think I have just the place for both him and that. Heimdall!” Thor bellowed at the sky. The bifrost struck, and took Thor, Malekith, and the Hulk with it.

Silence filled the court yard, except for an idle hum from the spaceship still sticking straight up out of it.

“Did Thor just remove the threat to Asgard?” Sitwell asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, it seems he did.” Steve was almost laughing, looking at the rest of the dark elves and lifting an eyebrow. They responded by dropping their weapons and sitting on the ground, hands going up. “Well, this has been a lot of drama, hasn’t it?”

“You all might be pleased to hear that Coulson’s been rerouted and is on his way here. He won’t land for an easy twelve hours yet, but he’s going to be in charge of cleanup, what there is.” Sitwell said after a beat.

“It’s still my spaceship.” Tony replied, hovering and looking at it. “Look, we have some prisoners, can we offer them some kind of amnesty in exchange for showing me how to get this thing back to NASA because the doors are not exactly obvious, and who knows what the control scheme is.”

“Well, there’s precedent for it.” Sitwell come out from one of the buildings, picking his way over and considering the cluster of disarmed prisoners. Steve was standing over them, Natasha was rounding up their weapons into a pile. “Quite a bit, actually. If they have valuable intel, I’m sure we can figure out something.”

“I’m not sure they speak our language. Actually, I’ve yet to hear one speak except for Malekith.” Steve told him. “We really need some kind of Allspeak translator.”

Tony landed, considering. “JARVIS, call Pepper’s phone for me.” It rang all of twice before she picked up. “Hey, baby. Easy mop up. I have a spaceship! How’s Loki?”

“You have a spaceship?” Pepper repeated back, because sometimes that was necessary with Tony.

“Wait? A spaceship?” Loki asked, because it was a welcome distraction from the indignity of his
injuries being looked at and cleaned. The sooner he was off this catheter, the better. “Did Tony somehow steal a Harrow from Malekith?”

Tony popped the visor of his suit. “Loki’s awake!” He told everyone cheerfully. “Pepper, I need you to go to speakerphone because I need Loki’s linguistics.”

Pepper put the phone on speaker and passed it to Loki. “I’m honestly not sure what he’s on about.”

“So no different than normal.” Loki giggled, taking the phone. “Tony, what did you do?”

At this point, Tony had the call on speaker on his suit so that question made Steve laugh out loud. “Well, Thor just took Malekith and the Aether thing back to Asgard. Malekith left behind a spaceship and some dark elves.”

Loki stared at the phone, blinking slowly and hissing out a breath as his wounds were dressed again. “I realize I’m so very drugged. So I’m going to ask you to clarify that, a bit. Malekith left a ship behind?”

“Well, yeah. I’m not sure of the make and model or anything, does that count for spaceships?” Tony stared up at it, putting the facemask back down and getting approximate dimensions from JARVIS, quoting them back to Loki as he put the mask back up. “Does that help?”

Loki rubbed his face. “Malekith left his capital ship behind.” He said that very, very slowly. “And it probably still has at least one Harrow, unless they launched all of them on Asgard. I suppose that’s possible.”

“An arrow? What?” Clint asked. Everyone had gathered closer to listen to Loki’s voice coming from Tony’s armor.

“Harrow. It’s an attack fighter that can launch off the capital ship. Think of it like a fighter jet launching from a carrier. He left his fucking command carrier behind.”

Tony stared back up at it. “Ah. Well, Thor said I could keep it if I could steal it.”
“Ah. Yes. Of course he did. Spoils of war, Asgard has plenty of that in their history. Don’t let Thor fly it, he damn near killed us trying to fly a Harrow.”

“Well, unless you have any better ideas he’s going to have to, because I’m going to hand it over to NASA.”

Loki looked at Pepper. “How much of this conversation am I hallucinating?”

“None of it.” She confirmed, smiling ruefully.

“Well. This has been informative but I’m actually calling because you have Allspeak, right?” Tony walked up to the dark elves, all of which stayed put but leaned away from him.

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Can you speak to dark elves?”

He let his head fall back against the pillows, racking his brain. “Their home language is Shiväisith.”

Tony watched all of the elves suddenly focus on him. “They keyed in on that.”

“It predates us. It predates everything, dark elves predate the known universe.” He rubbed his eyes. “I know just enough of it to get myself into serious trouble.”

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence.” Sitwell frowned.

“Okay, would you like to be the linguist for older-than-the-universe races going forward?” Loki wanted to know.

“No I would not. What could we gain from treating them well?”
“Everything. Do you not understand how old they are? If you can give them a home that won’t kill them, they could teach you things that will make humanity frightening enough to survive owning a bifrost. Don’t restrain them and don’t try to take their masks off, they’ll die. They can hear me?”

“Yeah, they can hear you.” Tony confirmed, then twitched when Loki’s voice came back in a language he was hard-pressed to describe, let alone explain how Loki’s vocal cords were managing it. One of the elves responded, and this went back and forth a few times before they switched languages to something that didn’t sound like someone training a cat and a whale to sing opera.

“A home that won’t kill them. Must be why Malekith did all this.” Clint muttered. “They’ll probably need, like, a specialized biodome of some kind.”

“The last death throes of a dying society.” Steve had his cowl off, staring up at the ship. “Things are going to get interesting as we start interacting more with the rest of the universe.”

“I’m not sure I’m looking forward to it.” Sitwell was sour.

“It could have gone a lot worse. This is one of the least damaging fights the Avengers has ever had.” Natasha pointed out. “If all we have to do is move a spaceship and resod a courtyard?”

“Those words have never before been put in that order.” Clint hummed.

“.Okay.” Loki said, clearing his throat. “There’s a handful of staff on the carrier. In exchange for protecting all of them, they’ll help move the carrier wherever you like. You’ll have to ask Thor for any further translating. I was just given more painkillers.”

“That’s fair. Get some rest, baby, I’ll see you soon.” Tony said, hanging up and shrugging at Sitwell. “Honestly I’m surprised he stayed awake that long. He nearly died.”

“Baby?” One of the dark elves wanted to know. “He seems far from infancy.”

There was another long, silent pause as everyone stared at the elves, still sitting on the ground.

“Is this really so surprising?” The same one wanted to know.
“No. No probably not. It just kind of figures.” Steve stepped up and offered a hand down to the one speaking. “Welcome to Midgard.”

Tony had wanted to move the ship as fast as possible, but of course that didn’t work out.

Closer SHIELD assets arrived on site and helped secure it, speaking to the university and in the end agreeing to cordon off the courtyard so the rest of the campus could operate. It’s London, after all, it seemed highly unlikely someone was going to try to shoot at the stupid thing. Coulson was in route to take over, and sent along orders on how to handle things as they were. He also agreed to call Dr. Strange while he was in the air and start trying to broker a contract for Strange to help set up ‘somewhere safe’ for their prisoners/refugees.

That the dark elves were functionally fatally allergic to light was one thing. SHIELD had plenty of underground facilities, and could have renovated one to suit their needs. That they were apparently allergic to the entire state of matter of the known universe was another issue entirely. Nobody wanted to argue with them about it, or that the masks were keeping the universe from poisoning them, but how was Malekith special then?

None of them seemed able to answer why Malekith was able to go unmasked, which raised some other weird questions. Thor’s return, with Bruce in Asgardian garments, didn’t yield any real answers.

“I suppose it’s very possible he’s told them very convincing lies. It’s also possible he just has powers they didn’t.” Thor had found the street food, or very possibly the food trucks found him. He was currently working on some kind of steamed bun. “I think they’re actually related to the ‘fairy’ legends of Midgard.”

“You’re joking.” Steve stared.

“Not at all. We visited, likely they did as well, or our stories of them joined part of the culture here. It’s hard to tell.” He admitted. “I agree that Dr. Strange might be the best bet. Where are they right now?”

“Well, they fetched their remaining cohorts off the ship, so we’re up to seventeen of them.” Tony passed out street food containers. “We can’t do anything about the physical-matter thing, but the
light, yeah. SHIELD rented out some empty box trucks, filled them with cots and let them shut all the doors.”

“I can likely help you move the ship to your NASA.”

“Thanks for offering but Loki told me not to let you fly it. Also, Phil wants to see it in situ, as it were.”

Thor blinked, then laughed. “My brother’s awake? That is good news dearly needed.”

“Here and there, according to Pepper. The painkillers knock him out a while then he wakes back up.” Tony looked at his phone. “He’s being a stubborn brat, but I’m glad for it, his help was invaluable and was at just the right time.”

“So what’s the plan now?” Clint wanted to know. Sitwell was still with the SHIELD agents on site and had frankly seemed glad when the Avengers had wandered off.

“I wasn’t given any standing orders. I wasn’t told we could leave, either. We’re waiting for Phil.” Steve collected empty containers from people and threw them away.

“I got everyone hotel rooms by the hospital. If we’re waiting we may as well get some rest.” Tony reflected.

“I must return home, and I should take Sleipnir and Fenrir with me.” Thor’s voice got heavy and sad. “I think this news was lost in the chaos, but mother died in the battle.”

Everyone jolted, shock and sadness going through them, as well as a good bit of dread for Tony as he realized that Loki was likely only holding off an emotional breakdown due to copious amounts of morphine.

“Father’s… Not well. We are all mourning, but… if he goes into another Odinsleep someone must be there to stand in his place. I’m the only one left. Loki was pressed into that role previously but he’s in no state.” He shook his head, rubbing his eyes with the back of one hand. “It’s a terrible thing. I fear one of us will have to take the throne before your lifetimes are out, but I do not think either of us cares for it now.”
“Yeah, Loki’s said before he’s not interested. The healers you brought seemed to think he’d be called on to help you when the time came, though.”

“I cannot say at this point what the future holds, or when it will change. Loki is a much better bureaucrat than I will ever be. Letting him have a role where he doesn’t feel diminished or pandered to might require some changes in how Asgard rules.”

“Let us know if there’s any way we can help.” Steve patted his back, then hugged him when Thor did. “We’re very sorry. All of us liked Frigga.”

Thor made a low, mournful noise, leaning into the hug and not arguing when he was made the center of a group hug.

Did the hospital like that they grabbed Loki’s bed and took him down and out of the hospital entirely, cheerfully wheeling him across the street to the park? No. But they would have liked Sleipnir and Fenrir coming back into the hospital even less.

Loki stayed on the bed because he can’t do anything else, really, arms up to hug his children in turn as he spoke to them. They were relieved to see him alive, and understood that he was very weak, only nudging him gently as he hugged them as best as he could.

“Be good for your uncle. Guard your grandmother’s grave, when you can. I will be fine, with time.” He kept his voice quiet, one hand holding each of them close. “You are good sons. You saved my life and I’m lucky to have you. Now go on.” They stepped back enough to let Thor join them.

“You’re not going to let me take you home, are you.” Thor was resigned. “I cannot lose another family member, not now.”

“I’m already home. Close enough. Right planet, anyway, and I think they will let me be transferred to the tower in a few more days.” Loki mustered a smile and grunted when he was hugged, patting Thor’s back. “But if you absolutely need help, don’t hesitate to call. I’m not combat worthy but I can put Odin’s council in line.”
“You could be mostly dead, also drunk, and still do that.” He sighed and leaned their foreheads
together before stepping away, looking to the rest of the Avengers. “I will return.”

“You know where we’ll be.” Steve nodded, and they all watched the Bifrost hit and take Thor,
Sleipnir and Fenrir.

Loki buried his face in his hands, shivering, before dropping them and looking up. “If one of you
could take me back inside, and drug me copiously, I’d appreciate it.”

“How about we take you back inside and call your therapist?” Pepper suggested, voice gentle.

“Ah. Yes. That might also work.” Loki’s hysterical giggle trailed into hiccupping sobs, that he tried
desperately to muffle into a pillow as they moved him.

“That is a hell of a thing.” Phil said, hands on his hips and head tipping back, then body tipping back
a bit, as he looked up at Malekith’s carrier ship.

“Is that really all you can say about this?” Skye wanted to know.

“What am I supposed to say about this?” He wanted to know.

“Oh hey, you’re the one who stole Phil’s phone!” Tony said brightly, walking up and offering his
hand. “Hi Phil. Glad you and your new playmates could make it.”

“Hi Tony. As professional as ever I see. This bad boy apparently broke a water main at the very least
when it dug into the ground. It’s been shut off, but the school wants it moved so they can go about
fixing that. What’s the plan?” Phil watched Skye shake Tony’s hand as she contemplated
spontaneous combustion, which was almost worth this whole mess.

“Hey, in our defense, this is the least mess the Avengers has ever made.”

“That’s actually sort of sad.” Skye decided.
“But not entirely our fault. I’ve been talking to some of the dark elves via walkie talkie because that’s apparently the level we’re operating at right now, and they’ve entirely accepted moving this thing and giving it up in exchange for safety.”

“They could use it to escape, can’t they?” Phil hummed, looking up at it again.

“Yeeeaah. Escape in ways I barely understand. From what they’re telling me, this thing is not only FTL, it’s dimensional travel. It might, in fact, tessellate, if you catch the reference.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck. “But the thing is, there’s nowhere for them to escape to? Everywhere they go is going to have the same problem they have here. At least we’re saying look, help us move this thing and we’ll try to find a safe place for you. That’s more than they have anywhere else and its shit. Did Dr. Strange have any good news?”

“He’ll have to meet them to entirely assess the problem but he expects it might be less the universe, more with them. He says either way he should be able to find a solution. He walks into other dimensions all of the time, he can set up living quarters for them that meet their needs. It won’t be cheap, of course, nothing Strange does is, but he’s by far the most reliable of the mystics, and possibly the only one who can do this kind of work.”

“Well, both SHIELD and Stark Industries, as well as NASA and the entire human race, may very well profit from this venture, so I’m sure I can help subsidize that cost.”

“Good man. Does NASA know this thing is coming?”

“Yeah, I spoke to them. It’s a ship the size of a skyscraper, they don’t really have a place to put it right now that’s indoors. The good news is, it has a banging stealth option so once we put it somewhere we can set it to invisible while we figure that out.”

“SHIELD doesn’t have a place to put it either. Not this kind of verticality anyway. If it was laying down that’s something else.”

“I asked. It’s not really designed for that, but it’s not really not, either.”

Phil looked at him. “What.”
“Look, it’s a vessel meant for operating in zero-g. The concept of up is really loose, and it has artificial gravity. In theory we can lay it down and park it and it’d just make getting in and out of the thing sort of interesting, but they’ve never tried.”

“Hangar One.” Bruce walked up. “We can put it in Hangar One. Or we can try.”

“That’s, like. Not in use anymore is it?” Tony blinked, getting his phone out. “That’s, what, San Jose?”

“It’s one of the biggest structures ever built. If anywhere can house this beast lying down it’s Hangar One and it’ll be really easy to push it to modern use.”

Phil also had his phone out, Skye looking over his shoulder. “Actually. Yes. I approve of this. I don’t want this thing on SHIELD property right now. I don’t want to give them an excuse. I’ll make some calls and get people moving, and help secure the site. You call your friends at NASA and Space X to get personnel moving. Even if it’s obvious where we put it, I’d just as soon it be out of sight. And Moffett Air Field can get a new role in history.”

“I’m on it. Great idea Bruce.” He patted Bruce’s back and set about making some phone calls, staring up at the ship.
“There we are.” The nurse secured a bandage over Loki’s IV puncture. “Let’s get you on your feet.”

“Yes, please.” Loki offered his hands. The nurse took one, Tony took the other, and both hefted him to standing next to the hospital bed. “Ah. Much better. I could do with some real clothes and a shower, though.”

“Shower first.” Pepper half-smiled. “Darcy was nice enough to run an errand for me, so I have some comfy clothes for you to get home in.”

He nodded, stretching slowly and wincing, looking at Tony. “I thought you’d be seeing your spaceship off.”

“No, I’m riding along. They’re clearing airspace here and in San Jose right now. Besides, you’re more important.” Tony said seriously. “I wanted to make sure you’re on your feet and good to fly before I go. I’ll meet you back in New York.”

Loki mustered a smile and tugged Tony into a hug. “More important than your world changing spaceship, goodness.”

“Oh, stop.” Tony hugged back, as tight as he dared. “One of my jets is at the nearest airport, standing by with a rested crew. I’ve got medical transport arranged, just let the nurses know.”

Pepper hugged them both. “I’ll take care of him.”

“I’ll allow myself to be taken care of.” Loki said with as much dignity as he could muster, making them laugh. “Now, off with you. Give my regards to Agent Coulson.”

“So tell him you’re still scared of him, but you miss him anyway?” Tony stepped back, oofing when Loki shoved him. “Call me if you need me, I’ll come running.”

“I’m sure you will.” Loki watched him go, then looked at the nurse, who was neatening equipment for removal from the room. “About that shower?”
“Go ahead sir, there’s fresh towels in there. There’s a bench in the shower, sit down and call us if you feel light headed.”

He nodded, and accepted Pepper’s steadying hand for the few steps to the bathroom.

The University was a flurry of activity when Tony arrived. More SHIELD personnel had arrived, along with local forces, and a perimeter was loosely established around the craft in anticipation of it lifting off shortly.

“What’s our status?” He asked, stepping out of the Iron Man armor to join the Avengers and Coulson.

“Good morning.” Bruce handed him coffee.

“Morning.” He accepted it.

“Moffett Air Field has cleared us airspace around Hangar One, and just off the coast there.” Coulson replied. “We’ll have clear air space here in fifteen minutes, but only a window of it.”

“Fair enough. How are the elves?”

“They got some rations off the ship, and seem in reasonable moods. We’re waiting on Dr. Strange; he’s going to try to sort them out before we let you depart.”

Tony blinked. “He’ll be here in the next fifteen minutes?”

“I’d say so.” Steve pointed by the ship, where a golden portal was opening in midair. “Once you go, we’re meeting your plane at the airport if that’s okay.”

“It absolutely is! Bruce, you riding with me?”
Bruce nodded. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Dr. Strange stepped out of the portal, which shut behind him as he stared up at the ship. “…Well!”

“Hell of a thing isn’t it?” Tony walked to join him.

“I’m forced to admit that it is. My understanding is, this ship’s crew is having issues existing in a material universe?” He lifted an eyebrow.

“Dark elves. Yes, that’s what they say. They claim they’re a primordial race from before things were really formed.” Coulson told him. “We’re hoping you can adjust that, or failing that, set up safe quarters for them to live. If you’ll follow me?”

Strange and Tony both did, the rest of the Avengers behind them. “An intriguing problem actually, and a bit more common than you’d figure for mystics that move between dimensions. Have you told them I’m here to help, not hinder?”

“Yes. They seem somewhere between spooked and respectful.” Coulson thumped the trailer housing the elves with his fist.

There was a long pause then the rollup door opened from inside, revealing the collection of dark elves. “Is it time?” One asked.

“Yes, let’s see if we can get you sorted out, come on.” Strange gestured them forward and they all climbed out of the trailer, staring at him. “Good, stay put for the moment.” His hands started working in midair, golden light appearing, resolving into patterns and diagrams.

“I’ll never get used to that.” Tony told Bruce. “And Loki refuses to teach me. He says it’s not for us, yet.”

“Seems like ‘yet’ is the key word there.” Bruce pointed out.
“You learn anything you get your hands on. Maybe he wants you to focus on something, like the bifrost you’re building or this spaceship.” Steve smiled a touch.

“OH! Well that’s interesting.” Strange suddenly said. “You’re all stuck between dimensions. Not by a lot, but you aren’t totally in this one and slightly in the other. That’s why you’re all so uncomfortable. You’re out of phase.” He paused, looking up from his lightshow. “You’re still going to be light sensitive. I can’t fix that.”

The elves all looked at each other, then back at him before one gestured at him. “Pull us here then. This place is odd but we’ll take it.”

“Wise words.” Strange did more work, the light twisting around his hands, then he casually waved both hands to one side. The elves all jolted in place, suddenly slightly in that direction by no action of their own. “There we are. You can remove the masks now.”

There was a long, silent moment then one in the back reached up, removing the mask and hood, revealing an ashen-pale angular face and pointy ears, blinking and squinting before sucking in a breath. The rest followed, a variety of skin colors but still somehow ashen, all standing and breathing, eyes mostly shut against the English sunlight.

“Sunglasses. They need sunglasses.” Tony said abruptly. “Agent, do your people have extra?”

“There should be tinted glasses in the quinjets, I’ll go look.” Clint said, blinking.

“Excellent, thanks Hawkass.” He watched the elves peel out of their gloves, stepping forward and offering a hand. “Hi. I’m Tony Stark. Thanks for the spaceship. I know I said I’d trade your lifetimes in easy living for your moving it for ease of study, and I’m keeping that promise, but we need teachers. I don’t want to damage it while learning about it, and I’m going to have a bunch of people wanting to learn about it. Over two hundred field experts from around the world actually and that’s just in the last day.”

That was its own issue. He’d put out a press release that had said ‘Hi, it’s Stark, I’m keeping the spaceship, but I’m not charging anything if you want to help me figure it out. Just send me your resume.’ Every space agency in the world had responded, as well as a flood from private corporations and universities. No one would be allowed to copyright any findings of course, the website JARVIS had put up for the applications stated that any innovations coming from the project would be open source, and any profit would fund the project. That hadn’t slowed the deluge of resumes, of course. There were going to be problems, but Tony didn’t care.
The one at the front rubbed his bald head. “Not all of us can do that, but four of us are ship engineers, one is a fabrication tech and two are pilot certified. We can probably work out something? And perhaps the rest of us can do more basic things, like safety and protocol? The things we had to learn before were allowed to do ship work.”

One of the others lifted a hand. “I can navigate as well as pilot. Our logs as to what’s inhabited and what isn’t aren’t accurate of course, because we slept so long, but most of the stars should still be there. If you can get new star files from Asgard, we can cross reference them.”

“Brilliant. All of you.” Tony grinned, then looked at Strange. “Wanna go for a ride?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Well, I did used to love fast cars.”

“Fantastic. Is the ship atmosphere safe for us? If so let’s board so you can teach us safety checks.”

Videos and stills of the dark elf carrier lifting, slow and straight vertical, out of the university courtyard went around the world, the liftoff being played live to anyone who had access to internet, or most television. The internet of course had already dubbed the vaguely cross-shaped, red-glowing ship the Eye of Sauron (or the Cross of Sauron, depending which twitter tag you wanted to go with).

After floating in midair for a few minutes as the crew found a way to patch into the airplane/tower frequencies, and after Tony had gotten assurance that San Jose was ready, the carrier simply phased out of existence, and phased back into existence over South San Francisco Bay, about half a mile off the shore.

“Did you just say seven seconds?” Tony asked after a beat, staring out the view glass at the hulking behemoth of Hangar One, and a flurry of news helicopters, which were visibly startled by their arrival.

“Yes sir, seven seconds.” JARVIS confirmed. “I am confirming us with local air traffic control, and working on moving the news choppers.”

“If we move they will move.” Stated one of the pilots. “There are no weapons on those craft that
“Relax, they’re reporters.” Bruce saw the look. “Civilian light craft. We’ll explain later. Will this thing fit in there?”

“This ‘thing’ is the Rage of Svartalfar.” The pilot gave Bruce a look.

“Needs a new name. Hope of Svartalfar maybe.” Tony said. “That’s beside the point. What’s your name?”

“Vailkin.” The elf shook Tony’s hand dubiously.

“Well, Vailkin. Will this damn thing fit in there?” As Tony spoke, the hangar doors were oh so very slowly being opened, revealing the massive empty building beyond.

Vailkin looked back out the view glass, where the news helicopters were slowly parting up the center, and past them at the slowly opening hangar, sucking in a breath and letting it out in a low hiss. “It’s going to be close.”

“We’re going to need to rotate the ship so our command deck faces the sky, and navigate by instrumentation.” The copilot said. “If we do that, it may work. If you take your flying armor and help guide us through the doors, even better.”

“You got it. Strange, Bruce? You good?” Tony stepped backwards into the waiting armor.

“I am. Largest thing I’ve ever seen use a dimensional portal. Worth it.” Strange was pleased. Bruce merely nodded.

“Okay.” Tony put the face plate down, Iron Man’s eyes lighting up. “Beam me down please.”

“I’ll show you to an airlock.” One of the disarmed soldiers came forward and gestured.

“Well fine, let’s throw me out the window instead then.” Tony managed to sulk visibly as he
followed the soldier out.

“Beam him down?” Vailkin asked.

“Human pop culture. Don’t linger on it.” Bruce recommended.

“How. Which radio signal do I want to listen to?”

“Tony, and anything claiming to be NASA or Moffett Air Field.”

“I’ll handle that.” The copilot said. “If you start maneuvering us?”

“Agreed. Closing command deck solar shields. Even with these glasses, that sunlight is untenable.”

Strange half smiled. “I did warn you.”

Vailkin grunted, and the *Rage of Svartalfar* moved, slowly tipping forward toward the water. It was a slow fall, leveling off facing the ocean and parallel with it before abruptly rolling 180 degrees, facing the sky. None of which changed how the occupants were standing, feet comfortably on the floor, which was now oriented like a wall.

“Artificial gravity is a very strange experience.” Bruce decided, flustered by the visuals but not turning green.

“You get used to it. It will make anyone boarding from the ground struggle a bit though.” The copilot admitted. “They’ll step through a sideways doorway and fall on the floor.”

“There’s Stark in his armor. This is going to be some very slow, precise maneuvering, so settle in.” Vailkin said seriously as Iron Man came up on a screen, hovering in ‘front’ of the ship, between them and the hangar.
Tony had managed to leave the airlock just as the ship started to roll, and get far enough away he wasn’t caught in the maneuvers. He hovered about ten meters off the tip of the ship, considering their position and the hangar. “Can you hear me, Vailkin?”

There was a pause then the response came back. “We can.”

“I’m going to guide you in. I go down, you go down, I go up, you go up. I’ll put an arm out for you to shift the ship that way. Once we get to small distances I’ll start calling those out. Does that work for you?”

“It does.”

“Let’s start by putting this thing on the deck.” He dropped altitude slowly, and after a few beats the *Rage of Svaltafar* followed him, easily lowering itself, hovering downward until they were less than fifteen meters off the water. It’s close enough he can see the power of the engines, whatever make they were, disturbing the water, blowing it in waves and spirals. They’d have to get much lower as they came in, but they’re still half a mile off the coast. No sense in getting that low, yet.

He adjusted, turning in place and hovering forward almost as slow as he can maintain himself airborne, and the ship followed him as he started taking them in a slow angled descent, aiming to come in over the airfield. “Whose bright fucking idea was it to put buildings on the approach to Hangar one?” He muttered this.

“To be fair, sir. It mostly held blimps up until now. Not a spaceship. We should be able to pass behind the fire station without scraping anything. Or we can swing around and enter from the far set of doors, they’ve opened both.” JARVIS said. “There’s quite a crowd on the tarmac outside the hangar by the airfield.”

He watched JARVIS highlight it. “That’s a few hundred people, at least.”

“Most of the staff of Moffett if not all of it sir, and it seems quite a few people flew in if you believe twitter right now. Musk and Bezos are reportedly both in the crowd. Some scientists and field experts from around the world made it, they all apparently caught the first available flights they could when you put out we were coming here. Also, a lot of news crews. There are dozens of live broadcasts streaming from the airfield, both official and unofficial.”

“Did our people make it?”
“They did sir.”

He pulled up a bit, lowering their altitude more as they started coming close to land. “Is there a loudspeaker system here?”

“What would you like me to play, sir?”

He grinned. “Space Oddity by Bowie, as loud as you think people can handle. Vailkin, there’s some structures in the way we may have to maneuver around, let me know what approach you think is best.”

“Understood.”

It was thanks to JARVIS that he could hear the loudspeakers crackle before music started to float over the large airfield, and he was grinning so wide it hurt as the *Rage of Svaltaður* crossed onto land as Bowie sang *check ignition and may God’s love be with you.*

He turned to face the ship and dropped them even lower, letting the belly of the ship glide less than a meter off the deck as he flew backwards slowly. “How are we looking?”

“The far entrance would be best and we have enough room to turn.” Vailkin replied. “Your Doctor Banner is singing along with whatever you’re broadcasting, what is this?”

“I’ll let him explain. Understood, bringing us around.”

It felt like it took a long time, but honestly, the ship was so large it covered ground like it was nothing, slowly gliding over the multiple lanes of runway, turning in a wide arc until it was facing the far entrance of Hangar One. It slowed as it came into final approach, Tony bringing them down even further and using his palm repulsors on nearly no power as lights, arms out and flashing them both twice for attention as he floated backwards to the mouth of the hangar, trying to help fidget the ship into position. “If you have any retractable instrumentation, pull it in now.” Apparently this was the right thing to say, because several long thin antennae did so, the back of the ship slowly swinging around to be parallel with the hangar itself instead of angled. He looked sideways, not surprised that the crowd hand moved to see them better, cameras on them and the crowd interchangeably. “We have clearance. It’s not a lot, but she’s going to fit.”
The *Rage of Svaltafär* put its belly (back, really) on the ground, floating a few spare centimeters off the concrete floor of the hangar and following Iron Man into the building. He stayed dead center in the building, slowly hovering back and eventually just inside the other set of the doors, watching the ship stop. “Okay. Power her down, you’re parked.”

*Planet Earth is blue, and there’s nothing I can do.*

“He really does have a flair for the dramatic, doesn’t he?” Loki said. He and Pepper were in an ambulance for medical transport, working their way toward the airport through London traffic. Pepper had a tablet computer out, both of them staring at it as she shuffled displays. It was currently split between a live broadcast from Moffett Airfield, where the footage showed a crowd swaying and singing at the top of their lungs, and another broadcast showing the *Rage of Svaltafär* taking a slow turn to line up with the hangar properly, and a window crammed off to the side showing twitter going mad with updates, a dozen worldwide trending tags, the internet also apparently interchangeably singing along and losing their shit about the whole ‘spaceship’ thing.

“Are you kidding? This is perfect. This is inspired.” She was grinning, almost near tears. “There are going to be so many videos put together from all this footage, of the ship coming in and him guiding it and the crowd. This is perfect publicity. He’s knocked it out of the park.”

“I do hope Bowie doesn’t mind.”

She snorted and kissed his temple. “I’m not sure he’ll actually manage to meet us home. We’ll see.”

“Actually, I’m currently sending one of the Iron Legion to Moffett Air Field.” JARVIS’ voice broke in through the tablet. “He intends to use it as a telepresence, so he can be in the Tower and interact with those at the Field through it.”

“That’s brilliant but doesn’t change anything I said.” She smiled.

“A quinjet has dropped the rest of the Avengers at the airport. They will meet you at the jet.”

“Fantastic, thank you, JARVIS.”
“This is shut down?” Tony was out of armor, staring up at the ship, which filled the hangar with a low rumbling hum. The back of the ship was about a centimeter off the floor, seemingly locked in place.

“Idle engines. They don’t shut off; this is less than one percent power.” Vailkin told him. The crew had all come off the ship, along with Strange and Bruce. “This lets it hover in place, and keeps all systems cycling. Keeps the ship viable, and the self-repair mechanisms running their maintenance.”

“The ship fixes itself? I cannot wait for you to start explaining all of this.” He rubbed his hands together, looking toward the far end of the hangar. Both sets of doors had been closed, just to keep some of the sunlight out for the dark elves, but the man doors were propped open and people were staring to filter in, walking along the hangar wall and looking up at the ship. “We should probably go talk to them. I’ll need to see about getting you some temporary quarters nearby as well.”

“Me too, please.” Bruce said. “I’ll stay here for a while. The Hulk’s had enough fun for a bit, I can oversee the project while you’re in New York.”

“You’re fantastic.” He grinned, punching Bruce’s shoulder as they all started walking to meet the larger crowd. He wasn’t surprised when Elon Musk all but elbowed his way to the front, attempted to say something, and failed to find words. “Yeah, I know right? Yes, you can all touch it, but don’t put your hand between it and the floor. It’s exerting force downward, it might crush your hand. Alright, do I have on-site project leads? Anyone in charge? This is the crew; you need to listen to them.”

In spite of the people packing into the space, they all went respectively silent, the dark elf crew stepping forward and Vailkin leading, introducing himself and his crew members and starting to explain what they were, and the ship, and how they were going to share their knowledge and teach how to be safe as possible around the craft.

Eventually, Tony Stark left because JARVIS told him that jet was less than an hour out from New York City, and he only lingered that long because Strange had generously offered to take them both back. The Iron Legion member, number 02, had arrived though and sat on top of the ship as not to be bothered unless Tony activated it.
He watched Strange don what looked like strange brass knuckles and move his hands, spinning one and getting a portal open back to his residence. “Thank you, for this.”

“No, this seems fair actually.” He gestured Tony and the armor through, then stepped through himself, leaving them in the entrance of the Sanctum. “I’m sure you can take it from here.”

He nodded and stepped out the door of the brownstone, kicking off the sidewalk and returning to the tower. The tower was quiet and empty, and he took the opportunity to take a long shower, during which he had JARVIS put in an order for food that would arrive as everyone else got home. He also contacted Bruce to ask if he wanted anything from his apartment sent as belated luggage, and packed two suitcases for him (neatly, even!) while they talked spaceship things, security concerns, and what shirts matched what pants. He also included another set of Hulk Pants, just in case.

The food arrived as a pair of luxury vans did, leaving him standing holding the bags of takeout, staring. “I own vans?”

“No. Not yet.” Happy replied as he opened the sliding door on one of the vans. “Look, sir, the limos work great in Cali, but a stretch vehicle that could take this many people here is a nightmare.”

“Alright, fair enough.” He conceded.

“Fits our maturity level anyway.” Clint got out, shouldering his gear bag and relieving Tony of one of his takeout bags. “Thank you sweetheart you’re a great stepford wife.”

He stared after Clint then looked at Natasha. “Did he help himself to the booze on my jet?”

“A bit. He hated leaving Phil behind.” She smiled a bit. “Besides, he would have done that just because you met him with food.”

Tony gave up, looking past her to where the two home health nurses were helping Loki out of the other van. “Hey babe, how was the trip?”

“Not as interesting as yours.” Pepper answered for him.
“You might have warned me that you hired nursemaids.” Loki was disgruntled.

“You’re held together with stitches and Asgardian emergency medicine, so be nice to them.” Tony retorted.

“Yes, yes, I will be.”

The vans were being closed up so he handed the rest of the food to Steve, looking at Happy. “I have two suitcases for Bruce in the lobby, could you take them to the airport and send them along? Make sure and get the information of the flight they’re on.”

“Sure boss, can do.” Happy nodded, walking in after them to grab the suitcases.

“So, any interesting discoveries?” Steve asked as they managed to all get on the same elevator, Tony letting Loki lean on him.

“Well, every hotel within a few miles of Moffett is booked solid by scientists and such. The elves are sleeping on the ship. They start holding, well, classes-slash-seminars tomorrow. Current deal is, anyone who wants to be in the hangar let alone the ship has to get a safety lecture.”

“How responsible of them.” Loki yawned.

“I’m trusting Bruce to represent our interests and prevent partisan hackery.”

“I think some of SHIELD would have rather seen it destroyed.” Natasha hummed. “Because they don’t have control of it of course, and it concerns them that you do.”

“Figures.”

The elevator opened, letting them all out into the rumpus room.

“So what kind of constraints are you under?” Tony asked, watching Loki accept the help from the nurses to sit on the couch.
“Many and varied. I’m encouraged to walk, but not too much. I have to be careful about stooping or bending, anything that uses my abs.” Loki sighed. “To that end I can’t pick up anything more than a few pounds, and that will likely stay that way for weeks. I’m also on a mild diet until they’re certain the healers actually managed to patch the organ damage.”

“In theory, since he’s cleared the first two days with no sign of complication, we should only be needed for a week as long as he keeps improving. His initial healing happened rapidly, we need to make sure that holds and he doesn’t suddenly have infections.” One of the nurses explained.

Loki gestured vaguely. “Asgardian healing potions tend to be flash in a pan, heal the vital quickly, leave the body to sort out the rest. They are so hardy, portions with extended duration are rarely needed.”

Pepper brought over a takeout container of tom kha soup, passing it to Loki, who took it and a spoon gladly. “We’re just glad you’re still with us. Take all the time you need to recover.”

“Yes, absolutely. SHIELD can shove any time table they’re considering for this.” Steve said seriously.

“I doubt they are. If anything they might be glad, since I’m rather a pain in their ass.” Loki snickered. “I’d say I fear going mad with boredom, but I’m sure Tony will keep me busy somehow.”

“When you’re able, it’s kind of the farthest thing from my mind right now.”

He gave Tony a look while drinking soup straight from the container. “Well you need someone in your lab reining you in once you start getting reports from those working with the Rage of Svartalfar.”

“Who knows how fast that’ll happen.” He shrugged, opening his takeout. “Only thing I’ve really heard so far is there’s linguists on site, that are apparently going to try to record the dark elf language, spoken and written.”

“As in learn it? Poor souls I wish them luck.”
“In relation to all this, now what? Are we just done? Should we anticipate trouble related to this?” Clint wanted to know.

“I have no idea.” Loki waved his spoon. “And I don’t care. Thor, I think, will use this to keep looking for Infinity stones, but that depends on a stable kingdom at home.”

“… We did hear what happened, from Thor. If there’s anything we can do…” Steve ventured.

He put his hand up. “There is nothing further to do or say, except perhaps to my therapist. New topic, because these painkillers threaten to make me useless and weepy.”

“The painkillers make you weepy, huh?”

The nurses had checked on Loki’s injuries, and redressed them. Now Loki was sprawled in bed, on his back with an arm draped over his eyes. “Leave it, Stark.”

“Yeah no. Talk to us.” Tony got on the bed, sitting and staring at him.

Loki was silent, and Tony had started wondering if he’d drifted to sleep when he spoke. “I am very much my mother’s son.”

Pepper got onto the bed on Loki’s other side, taking his free hand between her own.

“Always was, and will be. Odin found me, and handed me to her, and she already had her hands full with Thor. But… I was different so she taught me. She’s the one that taught me to use my seidr, and taught me to use weapons that actually worked for me. She’s the entire reason I held my own at all, growing up, and while the Warriors Three may never have liked me, they also knew never to cross me. She’s the reason my children are safe, even when the entire court called me… still calls me… Mother of Monsters.” He realized how tightly he was squeezing Pepper’s hand, and let go, a little.

“Can you lay on your side?” Tony asked. “Roll toward Pepper, baby.”
After a few moments and a bit of assistance, Loki was on his side, Pepper snuggled as close as she dared to his chest, Tony wrapped around his back. Loki was trembling in spite of his own efforts, and buried his face into Pepper’s hair. “And she died, trying to protect Jane of all things, and I couldn’t save her. I wasn’t good enough to get there in time. I arrived seconds late, and struck down her attacker, but…” He trailed out, choking on the pain, and they both tried to press closer to him. “I loved her, and she kept me safe, even when, when my mind was broken she stopped Odin from hurting me. Thor protested, but she actually stopped it, and I, I couldn’t protect her I couldn’t save her…”

“Loki.” He interrupted, because Loki’s rush of words was coming faster and more hysterical. “Loki, you weren’t there. They sent Sif to get you after the attack already began. You had no way to know what or where the threat as, you responded as fast as you could.”

Loki made a feral, broken sound before going silent for several long breaths, blinking tears from his eyes. “They think I don’t hear them.”

“Who is they?” He’s admittedly a little cautious asking that.

“The courts of Asgard. My entire life, they think I don’t hear them. Even during the funeral, thinking I was sorrow-blind, further maddened by it all. Some even said I was the one that killed her, and blanked Jane’s mind and killed her attacker to frame him.”

“Holy shit Loki, that’s fucking disgusting of them.”

“Oh I heard them, and Odin was right there, and it was so easy to steal some power back from him and lunge at them. Thor grabbing one of my arms kept me from killing them, but he got frostbite doing it.” Loki almost laughed, scrubbing at his eyes with one hand. “Odin didn’t say anything until after the funeral. He mourns silently, but he’s like… a house where the outer walls stand and everything inside has crumbled and rotted away. I fear for his mind.”

“What did he say?” Pepper prompted.

“He said to them, ‘I expect you to give my child who is both the same respect you give my son.’ He said to me, ‘you took some of your strength back and used it before I realized, your mother would be proud of you.’”

“Sometimes, Odin is almost cool.” Tony reflected.
“He’s horrible, and I hate him, and if they had been talking about Thor that way at her funeral they would be banished. Sometimes in flickers, in moments Dr. Snitz would be very proud of me for, I can forgive him. Then I remember years of his acts, of his naked cruelty against myself, my children, and I know he doesn’t deserve an ounce of it.” Loki muffled a snarl into a pillow. “And now he’s just an old man in mourning, and if he survives this I’m not sure if Asgard will be better or worse for it. Even by Asgard standards, he is old, and he was a warrior king in history he’d just as soon have gilded over and forgotten, and he’s already had an Odinsleep in recent history. Without mother there…”

“Thor told us after the fight that was worried about that.” Tony said, thinking back. “That he may be taking the throne in our lifetimes, and that neither of you really care for it now. And that you’re a better bureaucrat, and that he’s going to find a place in the court for you.”

Loki considered that carefully. “I don’t think he’s wrong. Thor isn’t actually stupid. He’s not as well read as I am, but he’s clever, and can be very determined and methodical. He’s also never been much at diplomacy or negotiation, he always played bodyguard to me, if we were tasked with that.”

“So maybe giving you a Prime Minister position would work out well for everyone.” Pepper pointed out.

“Asgard doesn’t have those.”

“You say that like Thor wouldn’t say ‘make it so.’” Tony snorted.

“A good and fair point.” He sighed heavily. “This is home. Myself, right here, this. I had no intent of returning to Asgard, I was of two minds on even seeking my power back. This short life may have been worth it. Asgard would have me throw it away, and I have no desire to leave.”

“Asgard has the Bifrost, and I bet if we work at it, you could commute, and send us letters while there.” Tony pointed out. “If you even anted to deal with it, I guess. I Mean I get it. You haven’t really been welcomed or appreciated at all by the court there, and screw them, why would you want to help them?”

“I wouldn’t, but it’s not about them. It’s about the Nine.” He sighed again. “And mother would want me to help Thor, and take my rightful place, whatever that may be.”

Pepper adjusted enough to kiss him lightly. “Try not to overthink it. You’re home, and healing, that’s
your focus. Besides, if you’re not here, Tony will start a moon colony or something because I’m not enough to hold him back.”

“Hey. Unfair. Moon colonies are totally passé. Mars colony, that’s where it’s at.” Tony protested.

Loki snickered. “I see your point, but I am inclined to agree with him.

“Ugh, boys.” She rolled her eyes and kissed him again. “You rest, baby. We’ll be here when you wake up.”

Loki quickly realized that the nurses were as much there for Tony and Pepper’s peace of mind as they were to keep an eye on him. He’d been taken out of the hospital fast. True, he was more healed than a human would be at this point, but the injury still went deep. He was well enough to walk (though getting up or sitting or laying down was at best awkward), and eat mild foods, and shower on his own, but that was basically it. Having the nurses there until his condition further stabilized let Pepper go to work, and let Tony go to the lab, while Loki convalesced.

He blamed the painkillers for how long he slept, and was almost glad for the nurse who gave him a hand to sit up and move to the edge of the bed. The list of medicine was gone through, and the painkillers reduced, even though he admitted to himself that he felt like he’d been banged around by the Hulk again.

The shower cleared some of the fog from his mind, at least. “Good morning, JARVIS.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“What have I missed?”

“Would you like news headlines for today?”

“Yes please, then an abstract of any lab design work I might be able to handle from here, or the rumpus room. I don’t think I’m steady enough for the lab yet.”
“Very good sir.”

JARVIS was still running headlines when Loki walked into the living room, in soft sweatpants and bare feet, because socks required him to bend in a way he wasn’t feeling like dealing with. The nurses were sharing a newspaper, and he waved them off as he went to the kitchen, contemplating the line of stitches and glue on his stomach in the morning light before he poured himself some hot tea. “Who put the kettle on?”

“Miss Potts this morning sir, it’s probably over steeped now.”

He shrugged and drank it anyway.

“Also, sir, about eighty percent of the internet sends you well wishes.”

That made him guffaw as he got a box of muesli down. “About eighty percent? And to the rest wish me dead?”

“To be fair sir, getting above seventy percent of the population to agree on anything requires drastic measures.”

He had to concede that point, as he poured himself cereal. “Feel free to post something thanking them, and that I’ve made it home mostly in one piece.”

“Very good sir.”

“Can I have those lab files in holographs please?” Loki got a spoon and stood there eating as they filled in around him, files arranging in a neat cascade.

“That is some impressive tech.” One of the nurses said. Both were watching him.

“It only works because Tony has his living space set up like his workshop.” He gestured at all the tiny projectors in the ceiling, shuffling the files with his spoon. “Nothing from Moffett yet?”
“Not yet sir. The dark elves are currently discussing ship schematics with a group. There’s another group talking to the com tech, trying to figure out if we can make an adapter that would allow the computers here to at least read files from the *Rage of Svartalfar*. Happily this site houses NASA’s supercomputer division, and Cray is on site as well.”

He hummed, shuffling to reports from the Bifrost project. “Justin Hammer is a very organized individual isn’t he.”

“He is. He’s doing the project management almost entirely on his own, and has the project management team pushing his schedule.”

“Sometimes Tony is right about things.”

“Just so, sir. Do you feel like speaking to the internet?”

That gave him pause. “Why would I want to?”

“Various inquiries on twitter, sir.”

He considered as he chewed. “I’m in just the state of mind where that might be amusing. They’ll have to take me as I am though.”

“That’ll nicely silence those claiming your injury is a farce.”

“Photos of me bleeding all over the Hulk wasn’t enough?”

“Well, you do have a certain flair for the dramatic. I’ve posted that you’ll be livestreaming shortly, sir, so feel free to finish your breakfast.”

“I was going to anyway, I’m not a dancing circus animal.” He accepted some ‘take with food’ medication from one of the nurses. “I’ll be going into this freshly doped, fantastic.”
“Is this normal?” The nurse asked after a beat.

“Nothing here is.”

“Sir, I have a request.”

“Lay it on me.” Tony was at his work station, rapidfire going through design updates and corrections, and approving software updates for the Stark Bare phone.

“I’d like to request assistance.”

That made Tony stop and pay attention. “With what?”

“To be blunt, sir, with everything.” JARVIS minimized Tony’s displays, and filled them with a list. “Those are all my current tasks, above and beyond my own internal processes.”

Tony stared at the list, which was easily into the thousands. “Is this a processing power issue?”

“Not exactly sir. I’ve done modeling, gave it some thought. It’s more an efficiency problem. Being able to delegate tasks would be far more efficient.” The list split up. “This is my current suggestion. It lets me prioritize the lab and Iron Man callouts without neglecting anything else.”

He hummed. “This list suggests two assistants.”

“I was going to request Wednesday and Friday, sir. I’d like to put Friday over corporate holdings and the Iron Legion, and Wednesday over production, energy, and the Bifrost Project.”

“Effectively halving your task load.”

“And letting me dedicate far more cycles to research and development, which will be necessary as
research on the *Rage of Svartalfar* comes in.”

Tony rubbed his face then stood, opening a secured cabinet and getting out a box. “Okay. Partition as necessary.”

“Very good sir, doing so now.”

It wasn’t proper to say JARVIS had a central location. He really didn’t. JARVIS was too valuable to centralize. Most (all, really) of Stark Industries didn’t know, but every major SI facility had a vault-secure server room that helped carry JARVIS. He was also more or less in the cloud, crowd-spread across the internet. JARVIS was worldwide, everywhere, passive traffic monitoring the planet.

Probably that counted as supervillain stuff. Tony didn’t care. Someday, JARVIS might save the world.

But in the Tower, on the factory levels below the workshop, there was a server room that was JARVIS’ local control, and Tony went down the stairs and eyescanned into it, considering the circle of whirring computers and the holograph cradle in the center, the glowing amorphic form of JARVIS’ mind already floating there. “You’re sure you want roomies?”

“I’ll be in charge, sir, and they are roomies designed by you, so I am certain they will be perfect.”

He smiled a touch as JARVIS shuffled himself to the side, pulling a card out of the box and holding it to the light before tapping the center of it. The design in the card was grabbed by the projectors there, a pale pink amorphic form snapping into shape. “Hello Friday.”

“Oh! Hello sir.”

“I am getting better, friendly familiar greeting on initial boot.” He repeated the gesture, a pale purple form joining, both smaller than JARVIS, shepherded by his massive golden glow. “And hello, Wednesday.”

“Hello, sir.”
“Alright ladies, Grandfather JARVIS is going to show you the ropes, then you’ll be assisting him with some things. Any issues, feel free to ask him, or me. Any questions?”

“No, sir.” Friday said, as Wednesday said, “Of course not.”

“Very good.” He clapped his hands together. “Be good for him.” He left it at that, leaving the room and making certain it was locked behind him.

JARVIS had simply set up an ability to broadcast via twitter, remarking that anyone who missed it could play it back later. Loki ended up sprawled in a chair with a tablet, starting the stream and waiting, watching twitter names pop in on a chat sidebar and a stream of hearts start flowing from the corner of the broadcast.

“This is patently ridiculous.” He judged, picking up his tea and drinking from it, lifting an eyebrow at the chat, which was roughly half serious business (reporters giving name, network, and question) and utter fucking twaddle (gushing fans, non sequitur questions, a lot of ‘holy shit he’s shirtless’).
“Alright, I’m on three painkillers, and utterly useless, ask me anything.”

It really was ridiculous, but he was royalty, and long-used to addressing crowds. Some questions he couldn’t answer, of course, and said so. The serious talk about the events on Asgard, his injury, and the *Rage of Svartalfar* was quickly dealt with (and occasionally repeated in short as other people entered the chat). Loki ended up discussing Asgard history, and the all but forgotten war between Asgard and the dark elves.

He was drawing a chart in midair of the Nine when Tony banged into the apartment only to pause at this scene. “Is everything alright Tony?”

“Why are you giving the internet an Asgardian history lesson?” He asked, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Bruce just called. They, yeah, he wants me there in the Iron Legion armor and I want you in on this talk.”

“Yes of course.” He looked at the camera. “Sorry, twitter, farewell.” He hung up and looked at Tony. “Now what is so exciting?”

“The elves have replicator technology.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

*muffled screams from under the pile of movies that's happened since I started writing this, the fanfic trilogy old enough to attend second grade*

Anyway. Not beta read because my betas sort of forgot this existed. So let me know if anything's seriously broken.

The discovery that the elves had replicator technology resulted in two days of fervor and debate before the growing collection of scientists became resigned to a few things. One, even with one of the elves being specifically trained in replicator tech, it was unknown if they could, well, replicate one on Earth, yet. Two, even if they did, they weren’t sure of application. Three, if they did, it would possibly either destroy the economy worldwide, or start World War Three, or both.

Still, that didn’t entirely discourage them. Tony kept JARVIS looking at it and a group of scientists split off to focus on it. Tony was philosophical, stating that if anything, it might be a powerful tool to combat pollution, and may someday eradicate the need for landfills entirely.

JARVIS had already gotten there. JARVIS waited to drop that bombshell.

“I heard the Bifrost, is Thor back?” Tony strolled into the rumpus room, pausing when he saw Loki on the couch, going through what looked like a picnic basket.

“No. He’s trying to find infinity stones, and is looking after the Nine, per the palace doctor who brought me this on his request.” Loki looked up. “Books, medicine and a meal from the royal kitchen.”

“Aww.” He walked over and sat next to him, taking one of the books. “That’s sweet of him. Anything good?”

Loki opened and downed a vial wordlessly, pulling a spectacular liquor grimace after before opening the neatly wrapped food. Slices of roasted wild game from the palace hunting grounds, good bread, and fresh fruit from the palace gardens, including a pale golden apple. He paused, staring at it and
wondering what deal Thor had struck with Idun, and what Thor was playing at. He could guess. Probably seeing him near-death and then invalid had been a hard shock regarding his current mortality to Thor, and if Loki wasn’t taking his strength back from Odin, then Thor would find a way around that.

He picked it up and flicked a knife into his hand, cutting a slender wedge out of it and offering it to Tony. “Here. Try this.”

“Oh thank you.” He took it and bit into it, lifting his eyebrows at the taste. “Oh, Pepper would love this.”

“I’ll keep enough of everything to share, but I was told I should try to eat most of it. I am being mother henned.” Loki ate a slice of the apple himself, offering another piece to Tony. “What are your tasks today?”

“I dealt with what I had to for SI. I’ve been doing that first thing lately, keeps Pepper and the board happy. Stark Bare phone is selling, and liked. I updated your armor, and it’s more puncture resistant now.” He saw the look. “Hey, blow me, you scared the shit out of me.”

“It was not a pleasant trip for me, either.” Loki replied waspishly, setting the apple aside and building a sandwich out of the meat and bread.

“It wasn’t fun for anyone. I went through the Bifrost project reports and gave final blueprint approvals, then got yelled at by Hammer for being two days late.”

“Do not mess with his schedule. That is why you hired him, after all.”

“Hey, I let him yell at me. Apparently, the project is going as well as any large project, and he’s having nearly nonexistent crew turnover, but we’re still initial ground breaking and foundation work so we’ll see what happens in the long run.” Tony finished the apple slice and stole a berry of some kind from the basket. “Oh, and Steve’s buddy from DC is visiting today, so team dinner out tonight, maybe?”

“That might be lovely, it’s been a while.” Loki decided. “How is Bruce doing?”

“Enjoying himself immensely by all reports. It’s kind of a combined research project and science
convention, different field experts keep giving impromptu seminars. Lots of love and knowledge, it’s all very Star Trek and nice.” He paused. “Less nice, maybe. SHIELD is building new helicarriers.”

“I did help trash the last one. Wait, plural?” He quirked a brow. “Where do they get their money?”

“I asked Sitwell. He said it’s a combination of government funding and a genuine Men In Black situation. They hold certain things in copyright and get paid royalties. Doesn’t pay for large projects, but keeps the lights on in a lot of installations. They also have some mercenary aspects, search and rescue for hire, research for pay.”

“So any way they can make money they do.”

Tony snorted. “I asked about prostitution and Sitwell said I can’t afford him.”

Loki about choked on his sandwich. “Wow.”

“He did say I could probably afford Coulson though.”

“Old friends obviously.”

“Yeah.”

“I still think his tastes run toward near-Valkyrie women.”

“I don’t want to know what he’s into.” He put his hands up. “It’s probably weird.”

Loki rolled his eyes and reached out, catching the chain with the ring around Tony’s neck and reeling him in. “You really don’t have room to judge, Stark.”

“Mm, no.” He reached up and wrapped his arms around Loki’s neck. “I really don’t.” The kiss lingered, and like all of them lately Tony had to fight the urge to cling and cry after. He settled for just doing the first, burying his face into Loki’s shoulder.
“Multiple helicarriers.” Loki said thoughtfully, and a hologram popped up into the air, letting him look. “And who stole this?”

“Steve.” Tony mumbled into his shirt.

He gave up and set the sandwich aside, one hand petting Tony’s hair, the other manipulating the images. “Steve stole this from SHIELD?”

“He had a set of your glasses on. He took photos, JARVIS and I extrapolated from there. He wanted my opinion because he doesn’t like it. I’m not sure I do either. Yeah, this country has an insane military with senseless hardware just to give money to certain companies, but this feels different.”

“This is a statement.” Loki decided. “To whom, I do not know. It would not impress anyone offworld, really, so they are making it to someone here.”

“I kind of want to ask Pierce about it, but then I’d probably have to sell Steve out. He’s not supposed to talk about this stuff with us. Security clearance shit.”

“Pierce?”

“Alexander Pierce. One of the guys that runs SHIELD. Fury’s bosses.”

“Fury has bosses. Is he aware of this?”

“The Council. You know of them, they tried to nuke New York.”

That made him frown. “Ah, well the solution here is obvious. I should go ask this Pierce about the carriers.”

Tony pushed away enough to stare at him. “What?”
Loki retrieved his sandwich. “Politically it makes sense. I’m not technically a citizen, I’m a foreign dignitary. I’d be under no real obligation to reveal my sources. They may assume of course, but he’d also be willing to accept I have sources of my own. I could tell him a raven told me and he’d have to believe it because my father is known to keep ravens.”

“You have a point but if you piss him off he can kick you off planet or kick you into jail. He’s not a man to be on the bad side of.” Tony pointed out. “And you’re six days out of the hospital.”

He blew out a sigh. “I will barely be able do more than walk for weeks, let me play games or I shall lose my mind.”

That made Tony snort. “Okay, yeah I get you. Let’s just not sell Steve out in the process.”

“Fair, I will think on it.”

“Oh, what do you think about moving house?”

Loki blinked. “Leave this tower? Why?”

“There’s an old Stark Industries facility upstate that would give us more room. The main issue at the moment is flying vehicles. JARVIS, can you…” A display of the building popped up in midair.

“There’s a lot of superpowers in close proximity in this city, and our planes are causing problems for local commercial flight. They have us classified as military vehicles with priority clearance, but that’s a little nebulous.”

“This appears to be a warehouse, at least in part.” He spun the design.

“It is, currently. I have a crew assessing it and planning renovations.”

“Is this an insurance thing?”

“Uh, yeah. Partly. We’re probably most of a year out of course, until it’s ready for us. Up to my standards.”
“What will you do with the tower?”

“Well, the lab space stays for company R&D, once everything sensitive has been removed. Most of the floors will return to corporate use. The rumpus room and some bedrooms will stay, in case we have to crash in town, and for allies who need a place to lay over from time to time.”

“Hm. Well, your ideas are rarely bad. I’m certainly open to this idea. I’m used to living here, but I live here because of you and Pepper. I can just as easily live somewhere else.” Loki shrugged, finishing his sandwich then moving to put the rest of the food in the fridge. “Your tastes are ostentatious, but very livable, so I’m sure it’ll be a fine house. For the whole team, correct?”

Tony scoffed. “You aren’t wrong, and yes, the whole team. I might add in a larger landing pad so Coulson can land his monstrosity of a Globemaster there if he feels the need.”

“What is he up to these days?”

“Finding loose objects of alien origin that Mr. Stark’s company did not initially contain. Hardly the fault of the company.” JARVIS replied, the building holograph disappearing in favor of the SHIELD Globemaster.

“Yeah, we knew that would happen. We were focused on containing the largest, most dangerous of the alien wreckage and a lot of small objects are likely in private hands.” Tony admitted. “Most, possibly harmless, but a non-zero percentage are killing people, and doing weird shit to a marsh in Florida. We’re working on it, and learning from the wreckage as we go.”

Loki frowned. “First I’ve heard of this.”

“It’s a new branch of SI, mostly handled by R&D and the recovery teams. We might be designing a new airplane soon though. Revolutionize an industry. Elon is stoked, it’s going to be electric. Well he was stoked he’s distracted by the spaceship now.” He gestured helplessly. “Along with a lot of my R&D people, but the wreckage research can delay, especially since the Rage of Svartalfar is functional. So, the main concern right now is the killing-people part.”

“Given, yes. What’s the nature of the deaths?”
“Well, a fire department got wiped out by a Chitauri helm or something. That’s one of Coulson’s cases, he sent me an abstract because of the tech. More locally, it’s people McGuyvering weapons out of alien tech and knocking over banks.”

“Ah, NOW I remember you mentioning this before, just not with all this context. Shooting at Spiderman, which gets them shot at by Deadpool.”

“Right, and the style of the weapons is consistent. I think there’s a shop turning them out. I’ve reported this to the proper authorities of course. If it gets more destructive or violent, we might get involved. Spiderman is keeping an eye on it.”

“Excuse me sir, may I have your permission to shift some inventory in California?”

“Have at JARVIS, just update the databases so human staff can find things.”

“Of course sir.”

“Hm. Why don’t you give me the wreckage projects while you focus on the projects from the Rage?” Loki was thoughtful. “I need something to keep me busy and there’s only so much I can do for Hammer.”

“Sure babe, if you want? I’m certain R&D will be glad to have your input and guidance.”

“I’m not going to claim to be an expert in Chitauri tech.”

“Pfft, you don’t have to be. Have fun with it.”

That made him smile. “You do realize who you’re talking to?”

“Hell yeah, that’s why I said it.”
The wreckage projects were a rabbithole of course. It turned out Tony had an entire high-security facility of alien wreckage, with a team slowly going through it. Some interesting bits were in the lab already. It didn’t take long to make a decision.

“Hey, Steve, good timing. Are you available in a few days to be a set of hands? I still can’t lift more than a few pounds.” Loki asked as the elevator opened.

“Can you please wear a shirt in the rumpus room?” Steve sounded pained.

“Why? I don’t have tits right now. Bodyshifting is tabled until I finish healing the hole in my torso.” He actually looked and saw Steve wasn’t alone. “We have a guest. Fine, I’ll find a shirt while you answer my question.”

“Thank you.” Steve rubbed his face, and muttered, “I did try to warn you.”

“Is it normal that every sentence he says opens up several questions?”

“Totally normal. Steve, my question.” Loki carefully pulled a shirt on.

“This is Sam, by the way.”

“Hello, Sam, are you the one coming to dinner with us?”

“Am I?”

“Tony said so.”

“To your question, what would I be lifting?” Steve was smiling in spite of himself.

“Tony has a warehouse of Chitauri tech. I want to help sort trash from useful things for R&D.”
He blinked. “Huh. How much of my time do you need?”

“Half a day and some transport time.”

“I could use a bit of cathartic time to break some things. What do you think?” He glanced at Sam.

“Some people find that really helpful actually, go for it man.”

“I’m in, let me look at my schedule and let you know the best day.”

Loki shrugged wide. “I’m hardly going anywhere.”

“Steve, welcome back.” Tony came off the elevator. “Team dinner tonight, your buddy tagging in for Bruce, you down?”

“Of course we are.”

“I’m Sam Wilson by the way. Though so far, none of y’all seem super concerned about that.” Sam was obviously amused.

Tony shook his hand. “Steve approves, that’s enough, we would have figured out the name thing eventually. Wait. Sam Wilson? That’s familiar.”

“He was part of the Falcon project, sir.” JARVIS said after a beat.

“Falcon project, really?” Tony’s eyebrows went up. “I did work on that, it’s almost entirely Stark tech, how did that go?”

“Well, I’m alive.” Sam said after a beat. “The project is shelved for now.”

“I have a 2.0 version of it with a stealth variation, if you ever wanted to see.”
Steve quirked an eyebrow. “I thought you were a paratrooper.”

“I let you think that, sorry man, Falcon project was and is need-to-know.” Sam looked from Steve to Tony. “Yeah, man, I’d love to see an updated version.”

“I’ll start turning one out, sir.” JARVIS said. “Fabrication time, five hours.”

“Who is that?” He pointed up to the ceiling.

“That’s JARVIS. He runs the house, and Tony’s life.” Loki supplied. “I want to talk need-to-know stuff with you later, Steve. Well, mostly I just want you to tell me how deep you think I can dig without screwing you over.”

Steve was nonplussed. “Yeah, sure.”

“Okay, that is more than enough business. Where do we want to do dinner?” Tony wanted to know. “It’s not a proper family dinner without Bruce, but, I think we’ll be okay.”

“Greek?”

“I can do Greek, you guys good with Greek? Okay, let me text everyone else and make sure.” He dug his phone out and wandered toward the balcony while tapping away.

“This place is a madhouse.” Sam observed.

“Indeed. Welcome home.” Loki smiled at Sam’s expression, and went to start the coffee machine and tea kettle.

“Tony, does the name Hank Pym mean anything to you?”
“Oh hi Brucie bear, how’s Cali treating you?” Tony rolled his chair to properly face the video display, the Falcon 2.0 pack sprawled on his work table.

“Still a fantastic science sleepover, but I think we’re months out from any practical applications. We had a few more big names turn up, one of which is a Doctor Hank Pym.”

“Ah yes that asshole.” Tony grumbled as he opened access hatches. “That grudge goes back to my dad, man, then carried to me. A disagreement with SHIELD in, like, 1989 is in there too. I think he’s accused me of intellectual property theft too. Is he still mad?”

“He’s still mad.”

“Hooray.”

“What are you working on?”

“Falcon project. First time this model’s been prototyped in the physical, so I’m looking it over. Who else is there?”

“Carlton Drake.”

“Has Elon punched him yet?”

“Not yet, but there has been an intense discussion on the relative wisdom of launching shuttles from San Francisco, and a flat-out shouting match about Drake’s medical ethics. I hate to say this, but I think Drake is another Killian.”

That made Tony pause. “Really. Have you asked any of the local SHIELD people about it?”

“No, not yet. I don’t have any evidence, this is more of a feeling. He upsets the Hulk. The way he looks at me. Not like I’m a person, you know?” Bruce fidgeted. “I mean, I am well aware that a lot of wealthy geniuses tend to be, well.”
“Sociopaths?” Loki suggested, leaning in the doorway of Tony’s workspace.

“Yes. Or otherwise neurodiverse in a way that makes it hard for them to relate to people.” Bruce nodded. “This is worse. I’m not sure this guy has any empathy at all. Can we flag him somehow?”

“We absolutely can, and I’ll talk to Sitwell the next time he comes by. Maybe SHIELD has a file on him we can reference. For now, let’s not let him near anything sensitive alone.”

“No one can go near anything alone. The Rage is too precious for that risk.” Bruce shook his head. “We’ve got security in place and Friday has the Iron Legion watching over the ship.”

“Well, thank you for the report. I trust your judgement so if you say shit’s not right, then it isn’t.” Tony started closing up the wingpack, Loki moving to help.

“What’s going on there?”

“SHIELD is building three helicarriers and Steve is feeling paranoid about it.”

Bruce took off his glasses to rub his eyes. “Three. Three helicarriers. Dear god.”

“Yeah, agreed. Something is rotten in Denmark.”

“Denmark?” Loki blinked.

“Turn of phrase, babe.”

“Screw Sitwell, call Coulson.” Bruce decided.

“You know, you have a hell of a point, I’ll call him tomorrow morning. Tonight I’m going to eat some baklava in your honor.” Tony shouldered the pack.
He smiled. “Keep me updated.”

“Same to you, man.” He hung up. “Another Killian. Well, at least no one can blame this one on me.”

“I don’t think anyone actually blamed Killian on you. It isn’t as if you had the man under mind control. He made his own choices.” Loki pointed out as they walked to the elevator.

“Yeah. Maybe. Still feels like my fault though.”

“If you keep blaming yourself for everything bad that happens that you were at some point tangentially related to, you’re going to go broke trying to fix things that aren’t your fault.”

“What do you think the Iron Man project is?” Tony frowned at him. “It’s a very expensive apology and attempt to clean up my family’s mess.”

“Fair. I suppose.” He stepped onto the elevator. “But then, guilt and I have at best a distant relationship.”

“And that, ironically, isn’t entirely your fault, and you’re aware of it at least.”

“Mm. So these artificial wings. What is it with humans and obsessing over flight?”

“Humans obsess over anywhere we shouldn’t be. It’s in our nature. Besides, aren’t there pegasi on Asgard?”

“There are. They’re the chosen steeds of the Valkyrie. Not many of those, anymore, killed in battle. Asgard has a bloody past.”

“Show me a society that doesn’t.” Tony led the way into the rumpus room. “Here you go, Sam.”

“I thought we were going to dinner.” Clint was seated on the back of the couch.
“We are, I’m just giving Sam a new toy first.” He passed it over. “It’s yours.”

“What?” Sam blinked at him. “No, man, I know how much these cost, and it’s misappropriation of military gear.”

“Not this one, and don’t worry about the cost, come on take it.”

“He’s not going to take ‘no’ as an answer for this.” Steve advised.

Sam sucked in a breath then reached out and took the pack, shrugging it on then buckling up the straps.

“Now, this is a prototype so you need to give me feedback. You need anything altered, let me know.” Tony watched Sam adjust everything then step away and snap the wings open.

“Now that is cool as hell.” Clint appraised.

“You added texture to the wings.” Sam ran fingers over one. “Leading and trailing edges.”

“Carbon fiber bristles. It’s modeled after owl wings, should keep things quiet. Can’t do much about the rest of you of course, at least without computer modeling.”

Sam smiled and retracted the wings. “You mind if I keep these here?”

“Nah, not at all. They aren’t dinner attire anyway. Are we ready to go?”

“Stark. What’s the occasion?”
“Business mode? You wound me, Agent, but thanks for picking up.” Tony had the video call on a proper monitor, cradling his coffee with both hands, Loki leaning on the back of his chair. “I have a few things to ask you about and I didn’t want to go through Sitwell.”

“Okay, fire away.” Phil had his own coffee.

“Project Insight. That spectacularly creepy name aside, why does SHIELD need three carriers?”

“I wasn’t involved in any of that decision making, and honestly, Fury is keeping me away from DC. I have my own theories as to why. As to why three carriers, I think it’s a simple matter of escalation. Something that can handle larger threats. With the much larger number of superpowers and extraterrestrial threats I think that’s understandable, especially framed against American military sensibilities.”

“You don’t like it.”

Phil snorted and drank some coffee. “Obviously not.”

“Neither does Steve. That’s why we’re asking you about it.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s a statement, a huge resource and money burn, and I have no idea if anyone actually ran numbers to see if this carrier design could effectively counter a space-based threat. I think even with a full stealth package they’d be sitting ducks. Pierce and some of the Council pushed for it.”

“Should we be concerned?”

“We are on your side, you know.” When Tony just looked at him, Phil sighed. “I hope not, what’s next?”

“Carlton Drake. Active threat, or not?”

He blinked twice, and shifted, shuffling the video call to the side to pull up files. “Interesting question.”
“He’s on site at the Rage, and he gives Bruce the creeps. I trust Bruce’s instincts.”

“One moment.” Phil sipped coffee and scrolled the file. “Well, we’re watching him and not passively. Suspicious activity, possibly faked medical studies. It looks like the Agency hasn’t made any call on whether this is our problem or someone else’s. Nothing concrete. His desire to launch a personal shuttle program is regarded as ‘suspicious.’”

“Is Musk considered suspicious?”

“Musk has been very open about wanting to die on Mars. Drake has given no motive we believe. It’s a touch reminiscent of Dr. Doom.”

“Bruce said Aldrich Killian, in light of the medical experimentation.”

“That too. He’s being watched, anyway. Want me to add a ‘perceived suspicious behavior/motives’ note to the file?”

“Please do. Last bit, what crawled up Hank Pym’s ass and died?”

Phil smiled. “To hear him talk that was you, or possibly Howard.”

“Augh. Right. Anything you need from me since I have you on the line?”

“Talk to Fury. Some terrorist group launched a satellite last week, you can go look at that right?”

“Sure, if he wants me to. Thanks Phil.”

“Anytime, Tony.”
“Alright, where are we at?” Tony considered the floating diagrams. Loki was sprawled on a rolling chair, Clint was perched on the back of a couch again.

“Well, the Rage is sort of self-sufficient right now. Bruce is relaying notes to you but we don’t have to actively manage anything.” Loki was peeling an apple with a knife. “Detroit has construction in full swing now, which is keeping Hammer busy.”

“The new Stark phones and laptops have good sales. I’m well in the black this month.”

“So we aren’t in danger of being evicted?” Clint was amused.

“Even if I lost money every month, it’d take decades to bleed me dry, don’t worry.”

“Asgard is a mess. Odin isn’t right.” Loki was slicing up the apple into slender wedges, giving one to Clint. “Thor’s avoiding it by hopping around the Nine, doing important things but, that means Asgard is a ship without a captain.”

“Rough.” Clint took the apple slice. “Natasha’s in DC with Steve. I never get invited.”

“You aren’t subtle.” Tony smiled, also taking an apple slice.

“Pft, like Steve is. I asked after the satellite thing. Steve and Natasha were on the group that got the launch platform back. Not a lot of details.”

“The satellite itself isn’t talking so I can’t find it. There’s thousands of satellites in orbit. Silent, it’s just more space trash.”

“Which it might be anyway.” Loki hummed.

“Right. No further comment on Project Insight either. Fury blew me off.”

“I hate it.” Clint said bluntly. “DC is creepy right now.”
“As opposed to what?”

“I’m an outsider, man. Ex-con, ex-carnie. So I notice shit more than people who drank the flavor aid. I see things. So did Phil.”

Loki paused. “And you’re here, and Coulson is being kept away from DC.”

“See, man? I’m telling you, something…”

The lights in the rumpus room changed, the alerts going red for Assemble.

“JARVIS!” Tony barked, dismissing the displays.

“I took the initiative, sir. Commander Rogers just ran from the Triskelion while being actively pursued. SHIELD radio is saying kill on sight.”

“What?!” Clint jumped off the couch.


“Yes sir.” Friday reported.

“Can we stash some of the Legion in DC without anyone noticing?”

“On it, boss, how many?”

“Leave us enough to defend the tower.” Loki scrolled his phone contacts.

“Why the hell are you in charge?” Tony already had his phone to his ear.
“I’m not, I just gave you both something to focus on so we wouldn’t phone the same people. JARVIS?”

“Sir.”

“Do we have a mass phone list for the Christmas party?”

“We do, sir.”

“Mass text, as follows. SHIELD shooting at Captain America. Situation developing. Stay alert. Send.” Loki also had his phone up, and didn’t wait when the line picked up. “Sitwell. Why is SHIELD shooting at Commander Rogers?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If you’re going to lie to someone who has been lying for 800 years, learn to lie better. We are monitoring your radio channels. Now tell me why.”

Sitwell was silent for a moment. “Nick Fury is dead.”

Loki wobbled, and put a hand on a table. “Repeat that.” He demanded, making a severe gesture at Clint and Tony as he shifted to speakerphone.

“Director Fury is dead!” Sitwell snapped. “Rogers is the last one who saw him alive and was there when he was shot!”

Silence echoed, then Phil’s “WHAT?!” echoed in what sounded a lot like a scream through Clint’s phone.

“And this is SHIELD business, Mr. Laufeyson! So, I am going to have to demand that…”
“Wrong! This is now Avengers business!” Tony snapped. “Why in the hell weren’t we called about Fury?”

“You are a civilian, Stark! This is still need-to-know!”

“No one phoned me either.” Clint’s voice was ice.

“Agent Barton, report to DC immediately. We need you to help bring in Rogers and Romanov.”

“Oh, I’ll be reporting to DC, but you can go fuck yourself.” Clint was already heading for the ready room. “Phil talk to me.” The door shut behind him.

“And Coulson wasn’t informed either?” Loki wanted to know, and was greeted by a dial tone. “This is not ideal.”

“Master of understatement. Do we believe him that Fury is dead?” Tony rubbed his face with both hands.

“I don’t know, but Sitwell is apparently chasing Steve, which makes him provisionally the enemy, along with most of SHIELD. Steve didn’t pick up?”

“SHIELD has lost sight of him.” JARVIS said after a beat. “I am left assuming he is still running.”

“Okay. We trust Steve, yeah? We trust his judgement. There is no good reason for SHIELD to shoot at him.” Tony reasoned. “So yes, we have to assume we’re against SHIELD. I have contingencies but I really don’t want to show that hand. That move can’t be undone.”

“Elaborate.” Clint reappeared, geared up and shoving his collapsed bow into a holster. “And I’m taking the quinjet.”

“Bad idea, they’ll look for that. Take my bike.” Loki told him.

“Wait, really?”
“Yes, really. They know I’m out of action, they won’t look for it. It’s faster than any street model and it’s nimble.”

“Shit, man, okay. It’ll take three times as long but you’re right, they’ll look for the quinjet.” Clint rubbed his temple. “Phil wasn’t told jack shit. He’s making calls and will probably make a hell of a lot of noise. Tony, what’s your contingency?”

“JARVIS is deep in the computers of SHIELD. I can shut the lights off at SHIELD facilities globally.” Tony crossed his arms.

“Shit, yeah, don’t do that. I’m going to try to connect with Natasha. Can you stand by?”

“Yeah, I can do that. I have stealth armor too, if it comes down to it.”

“I’ll be in touch. You guys stay safe.” Clint jogged to the elevator.

“I’m out of action.” Loki said, after a beat. “I’m still too injured to be effective in combat, even against humans.”

“Thank you for not pushing. I want you to stay here. Someone has to, to keep everyone coordinated.” Tony decided. “And you already reached out to allies.”

“I can do that. Keep pushing me intel and I’ll try to keep on top of threats.” He nodded once.

“What is going on?” Pepper came off the elevator.

“SHIELD is shooting at Steve. We’re figuring out an approach. Clint already left to meet up with them.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I now have video from multiple angles, sir, would you like to see it?”
“Yeah, JARVIS, bring it up.”

The lights dimmed and a dozen screens popped up, security footage from the Triskelion, all three of them watching in a combination of horror and shock.

“Is that a helicopter. They chased him with a god damn gunship.” Tony’s voice was low and angry.

“Well, that’s pretty bad news. Should we make this footage public?” Pepper asked. “The response would not be positive. The public and the press would scream.”

“They would. But they’d probably be able to figure out I’m the source. Do we want to compromise our position like that?” Tony asked.

“I hate to add to the problems, but Agent Coulson’s Globemaster is in distress.” The video displays minimized in favor of a flight radar, with a flight tag highlighted before zooming in and bringing up satellite footage. “It is under autopilot as controlled by the SHIELD HUB and they cannot get control back.”

“Okay, we’re hacking a damn plane.” Tony grabbed an actual keyboard. “Loki, look at passengers and current fuel. We’re turning this bird and grounding her. Pepper? Can you find out where the company jets are?”

“I can, want me to check airfield space too? We might have a private hanger that can fit a Globemaster.”

“Yes, fantastic, thank you.” He spared a moment to kiss her forehead then focused on his screen, typing fast. “JARVIS once we get control we’re going to have to prevent SHIELD from taking control back or even finding this thing, that’s not going to be easy.”
“We have to let control towers of the airport they land at see their approach sir.”

“Only for the approach, otherwise this big-ass plane has to disappear.”

“It has a full stealth option sir.”

“Glorious.”

“Looks like a total of seven passengers and a lot of payload, including two cars.” Loki flipped between displays. “There is a hell of an argument happening right now in the common area.”

“Are those security cameras inside the plane?” Pepper leaned to look. “I’ve never seen Phil that emotional.”

“He has reasons. Ah, thank you JARVIS.” He considered the data. “Tony, it has most of a tank of fuel so, huge range. Currently over the ocean returning to the States.”

“Our best options are California and upstate New York. If I empty the corporate hangar in Los Angeles, we can just fit a Globemaster, but chances of keeping it quiet are slim.” Pepper said. “If it can make New York, we can land it on SI property and leave it on stealth, no towers or personnel involved.”

“Almost done. SHIELD upgraded their computer security.” Tony muttered, eyes focused on lines of code flying by on his screen, then slamming enter. “Attention everyone, this is your new captain speaking.” He said it loudly, voice severe. “I have taken control and am redirecting your flight. Sit back and relax.”

The displays shuffled again, then video of the common area on the Globemaster appeared, everyone staring in the same direction. “Stark?” Phil actually seemed nonplussed.

“You know any other bearded computer experts that want your ass home?” Tony snapped.

“Touche. Thanks. We were expecting hostility at the HUB.”
“They are going to kill us.” Supplied the young woman who had pilfered Phil’s phone.

“We don’t know that for certain.” Said an older Asian woman.

“Yeah we kind of do, May.” Phil replied, leaning on a table and looking at Tony. “So. Where are we going?”

“I need you here. Shit is fucked. I want you safe and need your help. Which I guess means your group is along for the ride.”

“What the fuck.” Said a middle-aged man. “Okay. I’m Agent Garrett and what fucking authority do you have Stark?”

“The authority of ‘I am flying your plane.’ Deal with it. Coulson, I’m landing you in upstate New York by route of Canada. You’ll be shifting to private jet from there. I’m leaving you in JARVIS’ hands because I need to help Steve.”

“Okay.” Phil nodded. “We’ll see you soon.”

The screen dropped in favor of flight radar. “I have reset the autopilot to a new course, sir, and have successfully diverted SHIELD’s flight tracking to a commercial jet. That will likely give us about an hour before they realize they’re being duped.”

“Can we slap the flight tracker on a drone and set a drone to that course?”

“On it, boss, sending a drone to intercept the path.” Friday said. “No guarantee how long it’ll throw them off.”

“JARVIS, Friday, you’re both brilliant.” He flopped into a chair. “… Bruce. Friday have one of the legion grab Bruce and inform him of what we know so far. We might need to lock down security around the Rage.”

“On it, boss.”
“I just texted Hammer the same thing I sent the Christmas list. His reply is, and I quote, ‘this is a construction site, anyone causes trouble I’m hitting them with a bulldozer.’” Loki pondered his phone. “Vicious little man, isn’t he?”

“I told you. He’s a smile hiding a knife.”

“I just texted security to lift us to alert company-wide. Yellow level.” Pepper also sat.

There was a silence. Loki retrieved his apple, flicked a knife back into his hand and gave them both a slice of it.

“Okay, what’s our worst-case scenarios?” Tony said after eating his slice.

“That Steve snapped, killed Fury, and has gone supervillain. Or, that SHIELD is framing him as such.” Loki tapped his chin with the knife. “Continuing from option two, that SHIELD are actually villains.”

“Fury. Good or bad?” Pepper accepted a second slice of apple.

“Leaning toward Fury good, the council bad, in light of the nuke-New-York thing.” Tony decided. “Fury making sure Phil is away, and them saying just now SHIELD was going to be hostile to Phil or kill him, lends some credence to that.”

“Oh. So it’s Pierce.” Loki hummed. “You know, this might be an excellent time for me to call him. At the very least, maybe we’ll get confirmation if Fury is in fact dead. And if he is, we need to burn his killers to the ground. He was a warrior and deserves no less of a tribute.”

“That’s not a terrible idea, but you have to be careful man, Nick was the one that arranged for you to be here. Pierce might not be so hot about it.”

“What are they going to do, arrest me and have Thor arrive, grief-mad and leading the brunt of Asgard?”
“Fair point. I think we have his number.” Tony’s phone rang and he glanced at it. “It’s Bruce.”

“Talk to Bruce. Calm him down. Hm, no direct line for Pierce in SHIELD’s directory. Alright, I’ll do this the hard way.” Loki dialed the front desk of the Triskelion and settled in with his apple. “Yes, can you transfer me to Pierce? Tell him it’s Prince Loki Laufeyson of Asgard. Yes, I’ll hold.”

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