Are You There, God of Mischief? It's Me, Tony

by fullofleaves

Summary

If mind-controlled Barton doesn't come to spring Loki from the helicarrier, somebody else might have to. That somebody might be Tony Stark, who might not agree with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s interrogation methods and treatment of prisoners.

Luckily, with Thor's help, Supervillain Rescue Mission is a go. Too bad it starts spinning wildly out of control within minutes.

Notes

I started this story with the intention to write some crazy-ass crack adventure, but then I accidentally the drama. So... yeah, we'll see where things end up going.
Irish Up That Coffee

The great thing about being perceived as an asshole is that it's real easy to hide guilt, shame, self-loathing, and just about every other emotion behind a Kevlar wall of sarcasm. Someone tries to ask Tony Stark a serious question, he shoots back a flippant reply. Eventually they stop asking. It's a good system.

At 8 am in whatever time zone S.H.I.E.L.D.'s magic castle is floating through, Thor of all people has made a pot of coffee for all the sad sacks sitting around the conference table. Rogers and Romanoff's half-assed attempts at conversation have fizzled out. Now they all slump in silence wondering what to do next. They caught the bad guy. There's one mission accomplished. He's been dragged off to some high-security room somewhere for a repeat of whatever Fury did yesterday. Any minute now he'll crack and give up the location of the Tesseract, then S.H.I.E.L.D. can swoop in to save the world. The good guys win, everyone's happy, global security crisis averted. Throw a party. Celebrate. Get drunk again.

Live the rest of your life trying to forget you were directly responsible for the imprisonment and torture of another human being. Or... something that resembles a human being, at least. Close enough in Tony's mind to be the same thing. And no matter how many times he tries to tell himself it's justified, that Loki is a genuine homicidal maniac of epic proportions straight out of a James Bond movie, it still doesn't sit right. He deserves to be in jail or, better yet, stuck in a work detail picking up Burger King wrappers on the side of the highway. Not playing Dungeons and Dark Ages with Nick Fury.

Do the others feel the same? Hard to say. Romanoff: probably not. Tony knows she's seen - and done - worse. Rogers? No, he's a good little tin soldier, which means he'll side with the one giving him orders. Banner? Well, by the way he keeps rubbing his bloodshot eyes and poking at that tablet, it's a good bet he's been up all night tweaking his program that'll let them track down the Tesseract without Loki's forced cooperation. That guy cares.

Then there's Thor, who prowls around the table like a caged tiger. He very obviously cares, and who can blame him? Where others see a deranged psycho, he sees family. S.H.I.E.L.D. wants justice, he wants his brother back. Too bad he's the new guy in the office, the low man on the totem pole, and his opinion on what they should do with Loki carries all the weight of a feather.

Let me speak with him, Thor had said. Reason with him. I only need time.

Thing is, time is what they don't have. The longer the Tesseract is missing, the slimmer the hope of ever getting it back before something disastrous happens. Chatting about hurt feelings and whose daddy didn't love them enough is a civilian luxury.

So what's the next step, when by all logic you've done the right thing and yet your conscience is screaming so loud the sound of it reverberates through your whole body? How do you cope when the only thing stopping you from dropping your head into your hands in despair is the fact that there's a coffee cup in the way? What do you do when you're sitting at a table with people you can't bear to look in the eye because you know you'll just see your own guilt shining back at you?

You do the only thing you can do. Irish up that coffee.

Tony stands. "Well kids, this has been a great meeting. Lots accomplished. Really hard-hitting, productive conversation. Let's do it again soon."
"Where are you going?" Rogers asks.

"Back to my room. I have things I'm working on. You know, cutting edge modern technology involving wires and lights and other zany stuff they didn't have back in the land before time."

"Stark, wait," Romanoff calls after him, but he's already out the door.

There's a bottle of Macallan 25 in a locked case beside his bed. It goes down smooth.

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"This isn’t right."

Tony expects a reaction from Thor. Something. Anything. A word of agreement, a nod, even a grunt. When nothing is forthcoming, he tries again.

"Look, I don't know what the protocol is for you back on Asgard, but here on Earth it's not really socially acceptable to torture prisoners."

A muscle in Thor's jaw tenses. Now there's something.

"What did Fury say to you?"

A long pause, filled with expectation on the edge of a held breath. "He asked me what I was prepared to do," Thor answers quietly.

"Then let me guess," says Tony. "He told you just enough of his plan to convince you it's for the greater good. Made you think he knows what he's doing and you can trust him."

"No, he... He told me his full intent. I believe he was seeking my approval, or permission."

Seeking permission... that didn't sound much like Fury. But ferreting around for answers under the guise of a respectful conversation? Now that did. "What did you tell him?"

Another long pause. "We of Asgard do not feel pain as humans do. We can withstand much, and heal with far greater speed than you. The... methods... he proposed would prove ineffective on Loki."

"And based on your information, he was able to figure out what would work."

Thor immediately rounds on him, snarling like a dog. "You think me responsible for this?!"

"No," Tony says quickly, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace and taking a step back. "That's not what I meant. What I meant was Fury has this way of finding out things we don't want him to know. He listens between the words you say for what you're trying to hide. You tell him what will fail, he'll worm his way around to success. That's what he does."

"And this is the result."

Yes, Tony thinks to himself but doesn’t say aloud. This is the result.

He doesn’t really want to look at that result. He turns his head and looks anyway.

Loki seems smaller in that drab gray prison shirt, stripped of his intergalactic Hell's Angel gear. Diminished. He looks just like a real person. Right down to those little drops of blood on the floor near the back of his head. At the moment he’s either unconscious or he's fucking with them, and
for reasons that make Tony's stomach turn he sure hopes it's option two. But something tells him
that's not the case. Loki was dragged into the middle of his cozy glass cell over an hour ago and
hasn't moved since. He stays where he is, nothing more than a heap of discarded clothing with a
few oddly angled limbs left inside.

"This was never my intention," Thor eventually says, breaking the brief silence. And it was
promising to be such a good silence, too, since Tony doesn't feel much like talking any more.

"Hm," is all he says in reply.

"And this is not my brother. This is not Loki. If you had known him before, Tony Stark, you
would know that these actions, whatever he has done, are not his own. The brother I know would
not do these things."

Tony shrugs. "Lot of evidence says otherwise."

"He is a trickster, yes. He is a liar, yes. He seeks mayhem for fun then sits back to laugh while
others strive to set things right. But these accusations your people sling at him..." Thor pauses to
rub his face, as if the pressure of his fingers under his eyes might help him wake up from a bad
dream. It doesn't. "This is not my brother."

"So what, you're saying he's possessed or something? Mind control? Fairy dust magic?"

He means it half as a joke, but Thor doesn't take it that way. "I do not know. But that scepter he
carried... it is not of Asgard. Someone must have given it to him, and someone sent him here."

Now that's nice and vague. Someone. "No idea who?"

"No," says Thor. He drifts into silence again, arms clamping together over his chest as tension
crackles around his body.

Loki still hasn't moved. The guy has to be fucking with them. Tony pulls the flask out of his back
pocket and takes a swig before offering it to Thor, who declines with a frown. Maybe he doesn't
like scotch. Maybe he doesn't know what scotch is. Either way, his loss.

So, possession, mind control, or fairy dust. It's an interesting theory. A wacko theory, but
interesting nonetheless, and after all they're talking about immortal space men so wacko might be
the new reasonable. It's a theory that makes all of Fury's business sit even less well in Tony's
stomach. And at the moment, it's not so much sitting as roiling, like a toy boat in a hurricane.

"Just out of curiosity," Tony asks Thor, "what's the dumbest thing you've ever done?"

Is that a hint of a smile pulling at Thor's mouth? "Recently?"

"Sure. Say, last five years. Or even ten. What counts as 'recently' for you guys, anyway? A
hundred?"

"Recently," says Thor, "in direct opposition to the orders of my father, the king, I traveled with my
friends to the realm of Jotunheim. We killed dozens and started a war over nothing more than
injured pride."

Tony nods. Yeah, that qualifies as a little better than 'dumb'. "How'd that end for you?"

"I was stripped of my powers and banished to a place called New Mexico."
"I'm sorry to hear that."

No, he really isn't. This is starting to sound promising.

"Why do you ask, Tony Stark?"

He takes a breath and exhales slowly. Is there any use in stalling? No. He's just tipsy enough to convince himself that this is a good idea, and there's no doubt in his mind he can convince Thor too. "Do you ever… disagree with decisions other people make on your behalf?"

"All the time," answers Thor.

"And do you ever feel like taking things into your own hands so you can make sure they're done right?"

"All the time," Thor repeats.

"Good," says Tony. "Meet me back here at eleven."

"Why? What do you plan to do?"

"Taking things into my own hands. And that starts with getting your brother out of this shit show."

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The suit isn't exactly made for indoor stealth, but Tony can get around that with a few total bullshit lines about navigation mapping and how walking the hallways of the helicarrier is necessary for his new dimensional recognition software upgrade. It helps that Rogers can't tell a microchip from a mushroom and his eyes glaze over the minute talk turns to technology. Meanwhile, Romanoff is too preoccupied with tracking down Agent Barton to bother with anything more than a cursory 'What are you doing?' Only Banner raises an eyebrow, but if he suspects anything he keeps it to himself. As long as Tony just paces the halls and stays clear of restricted access doors, nobody looks twice. Crazy Drunken Plan Phase One is a go.

Thor is already waiting in the appointed place at the appointed time, skulking in a shadowy corner like a back alley thug. Tony doesn't bother with any greeting or small talk: better get right down to business without thinking too much about what total idiocy they're about to pull. Time for Crazy Drunken Plan Phase Two.

"Okay, here's the deal. We probably have ten minutes at most before one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s little worker bees notices something's up, so your job is now to listen and do exactly what I say. Got it?"

"Understood," says Thor.

Tony gestures to Loki's cell. "I've overridden the passcode, but security settings will only let me keep the door open for fifteen seconds maximum. After that, it's sealed shut for twenty minutes and nobody gets in or out without a whole lot of hassle. Door opens, clock's ticking. You go. No time for chit-chat in there and all tearful reunions are on hold until later. Throw Loki over your shoulder and haul ass."

"What of the mechanical eyes?" Thor asks, looking up at a camera overhead.

"Every camera between here and the nearest outer access door is currently transmitting a recorded loop of the last half hour."
Does Thor understand that? Probably not, but it shuts him up all the same. Tony continues.

"According to the cameras, I'm in my room, you're standing in the corner, and Loki's..."

Loki is curled up with his back against the glass and his arms covering his face. Either he crawled there himself or somebody dragged him, but whatever the case, he's not moving now.

"It'll look like Loki's right where he is. But that brings me back to what I said before about somebody figuring out something's wrong. We can't count on having all the time we need, so as soon as you've grabbed the damsel in distress, we move out. Follow me and do whatever I say, no questions. If our dumb luck holds, we'll make it outside."

"And then what?"

"Do I look like I've planned that far ahead? We'll figure it out when we get there. Just go stand by the cell door and prep for showtime."

At least Thor is a man of few words and quick action. A handful of broad strides and he's in place at the door, leaning forward in the pose of a sprinter on his mark. He takes a breath to steel himself and slowly nods.

Tony nods in reply before punching the passcode into the computer terminal, hoping like hell there isn't some secret alarm he overlooked when modifying the system. Nothing happens. Well, nothing unexpected: a little green light pings on and the door to the cell begins to slide open. Tony releases the breath he's been holding too long.

One second: Thor's already through the door before it's even had time to open all the way. Three seconds: he's across the room, bending one knee and reaching down to the body on the floor. Five seconds: Loki's in his arms. Thor's standing back up and pivoting around in one fluid motion.

Eight seconds: out. Tony releases the door hold button and it slides shut with a little hiss of air.

"Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Then it's on to Phase Three. Tony leads, Thor follows. It takes another thirty-eight seconds to reach the nearest outer access door. Tony counts each one in his head, hoping like hell with every step that some junior-level button pusher doesn't stumble into them and then try to go all heroic. It would really make the supervillain rescue mission look bad to accidentally maim or kill some innocent redshirt. But luck holds. The hallways are deserted. The door standing between captivity and freedom, though, is locked, and designed to be operable on the ground only, air pressure sealing it in place.

"Well, shit."

Maybe he should have thought ahead a little more. He turns back to face Thor.

"Okay, Plan B. Smeagoling our way out of here is no longer an option, so how do you feel about blasting the door then jumping through a hole in the smoldering wreckage? Sound good?"

"Do what you must," Thor replies.

"See, that's what I like about you. Always up for an adventure. Now stand back," he says, raising his hands to take aim at the door. "This will very likely cause an explosion."

"Or I could do this," says Thor. He steps forward, hefting his hammer, and one smooth swing later the door is flying off into the cloudy night along with its bolt, hinges, and part of the wall. Yes,
that also definitely worked.

Overhead a light begins to flash, accompanied by an alarm that's barely audible over the deafening rush of wind through the busted-out door. So much for 'do what I say': speech is impossible over this din. Time for non-verbal 'follow my lead', and also 'get the hell out before somebody shows up'. Tony flashes Thor a quick thumbs up. They must have thumbs up in Asgard, because he nods in understanding. Then they jump.

Tony's looking straight into at a thirty thousand foot freefall, unwilling to risk firing anything that will draw attention to him in the dark of night. Just drop out of the sky like a bullet headed straight for those city lights shining below, until he's close enough to disappear among them. He can angle his arms to steer in that general direction. Worry about landing when the time comes.

When a split-second of static hisses in his ear, he's expecting Jarvis with some annoyingly helpful advice about how this probably isn't a good idea. Instead, he gets... Nick Fury.

"Stark! Where are you?"

His stomach drops, if that's even possible while hurtling towards the Earth at two hundred miles an hour. All he can manage is an awkward, "Uhhhh... hey."

"There's been an incident with door eighteen, portside level three. I need you out there ASAP to figure out what happened."

Stunned silence. If Fury's calling him for help as if everything's still peachy between them, does that mean this stupid gamble actually worked? Nobody's noticed yet that he and Thor and, most importantly, Loki are missing?

"Well how about that," he mutters to himself. Then aloud to Fury, "Got it. On my way." At least that should keep Big Brother from wondering where he is for the next couple minutes.

And then comes the annoyingly helpful comment from Jarvis. "Sir, if I might suggest."

"Nope, I'm good. Let me handle this. You just keep track of Thor and tell me if we start to lose him."

"He's following directly behind you, approximately forty feet back."

"Good. Let me know if that changes. And block any more incoming conversations from S.H.I.E.L.D.. I have a feeling the next one might not be so friendly. Actually, let's go offline entirely. I don't want to give them any opportunity for tracking."

"Of course, sir."

The ground's coming up fast now, the city's yellow glow becoming clearer and separating into individual streetlamps and headlights. Unfortunately this means he's now in prime UFO territory: any strange flares in the sky will be reported to the local police by a thousand ignorant yokels. He needs to find somewhere to land, somewhere out of the way, maybe in a valley or behind a ridge. Or on the beach, next to what looks like a bank of dunes? That'll do. He flattens himself spread-eagle to slow down as much as possible, which really isn't much at all but hey, it's a start. Now, just a little closer...

It's a hard landing, waiting too long to fire up the repulsors, and Tony plows into the sand with a force that he's pretty sure is a hair away from shattering every bone in his body. He rolls onto his back with a groan and spends a couple seconds just lying there trying to get his brain to stop
clanging around in his skull. This is going to be the mother of all headaches. A few yards away, Thor lands in a perfectly executed crouch accompanied by a dramatic spray of sand. Show-off.

"Sir," Jarvis begins tentatively.

"Not now," Tony mutters. As he sits, something in his back pops and sends a fiery bolt of agony straight down his spine. That's a way more effective reminder of the night's bad choices than a computer telling him how he screwed up. He drags himself to his feet, cringing all the way, and lifts his mask.

A gust of salty air hits face with a sobering slap. They're on the ground. They're not in the helicarrier, not being chased down by S.H.I.E.L.D.'s jets, not locked in a cell after a botched escape attempt. They're out. Maybe just for now, but at least that's something.

"Holy shit it actually worked," he says to the night sky. "That was the dumbest, most half-assed plan ever, and it actually worked. I don't believe it." To Thor: "Do you believe it?"

"You thought it might fail?" Thor asks with a frown.

"Not fail, but I thought... we'd have a harder time of it. You know, something goes wrong, have to kick a few asses, narrow escape. That's usually how my plans unfold."

"Hm."

This is when Tony notices that Thor hasn't stood up. He's still crouched on the sand, leaning over the limp, shadowed figure at his feet. The muscles in Tony's neck and jaw tense, and it has nothing to do with the pain of a miscalculated crash landing.

"Uh, how is he?"

Thor shakes his head. "I don't know."

Those words, I don't know, are somehow worse than a straightforward answer of 'bad'. 'Bad' usually means 'it'll be tough, but we can fix it'. 'I don't know' has connotations of 'nobody has any idea what's wrong or where to even start trying to make it better'. Loki looks bad. He also looks 'I don't know.' In the half-clouded moonlight, his skin has an eerie blue cast to it. He looks... Truth be told, he looks a little like a B-movie zombie next to the tanned shade of Thor's hands.

Wait...

Tony takes a step back. It's not the moonlight that makes Loki's skin look blue. In the same light, Thor doesn't look like that. Which means... Loki's skin is actually blue.

"Uh, Thor? What's happening here? His skin is... what is that?"

"That is what I don't know," Thor answers.

Well, awesome. The supervillain they just risked their necks to spring from prison, the one they need alive if they're going to have any hope of tracking down the Tesseract before S.H.I.E.L.D. does, is now turning a weird color and probably dying right there in front of them. "I'm assuming being blue like this isn't normal for Asgardians?"

"Not for Aesir. But in truth, Loki is not of Asgard. By blood he is Jotun, and in my experience this is how Jotnar look. However, I have never before seen him take this form. He has always lived as a one of us. So..." He pauses, looking up. "I don't know."
"I hope you know none of that made any sense," Tony says, stepping forward again and kneeling down at Loki's side. "But if you say you've never seen him like this before, I'm going to go out on a limb and guess he's looking like this now because something's wrong. Reasonable assumption?" He doesn't bother to wait for an answer. "So that means we find a way to fix it, because I have this bad feeling he's not doing so hot."

"Fix it how?"

"Through the amazing power of logic. We look at the problem logically and see if we can't find a solution. Problem one? His skin is blue and..." Are those ice crystals forming on his shirt? "He appears to be freezing through his clothes. Is that normal for the Yo-thing you said he was?"

"Jotun. Known also as Frost Giant. So, yes."

"Frost Giant," Tony echoes back. Oh good, 'Frost Giant' sounds fun and not at all terrifying or monstrous. "Now that brings us to problem two: you've never seen him like this before. You've only ever seen him as a regular old Asgardian."

"Until recently, I believe he was," says Thor. "We both did."

"So what allows him to look like an Asgardian?"

Thor sighs, huffing out a long breath. "He has great skill in magic, and the ability to change form. It's possible that he..." The words trail off into a tense silence, and Thor looks down, then away. The gesture of a man turning from something he doesn't want to face.

"That he took on an Asgardian form," Tony finishes, urging Thor to go on because Loki's getting bluer by the minute and now has crazy patterns of ridges and lines rising on his skin. "And if he's been in that form for as long as you can remember, he probably prefers it, so changing now means?"

"His magic is fading." Thor's head snaps up. "This isn't his choice. He's too weak to hold it, and he's..."

_Dying._ But nobody says the word.

"Okay, that's something at least," says Tony in a half-assed effort to stay positive. Isn't that what you're supposed to do in times like this? "Now we know what's wrong. He hasn't been cursed by a witch and he doesn't have some mysterious blue space-man disease. We'd be SOL with either of those things, but this, _this_, can be fixed." He hopes.

"How does one fix death, Tony Stark?"

"In America? By throwing technology at it. Now bear with me. I have an idea." It's not exactly a _good_ idea, but he has to try something. "I've seen this on TV a few times. Well, not exactly _this_." Lifting his hands, he charges the repulsors. "But similar."

"Sir!" Jarvis barks in alarm.

"Just to be clear," Tony says to Thor, ignoring the warning, "you and Loki have the same tolerance for, say, a high-energy blast straight to the chest?"

"Yes, but..."

For the first time all night, Thor looks worried. "It's okay," Tony assures him. "I'll start off on the
lowest setting. Just a little jolt to wake him up. It'll be fine." He places his hands on Loki's chest, one near the collarbone and one over the sternum. Loki's icy shirt cracks and shatters like glass beneath the touch. "It'll be fine," he repeats.

*Please be fine.*

Gritting his teeth, he fires the beams and hopes for the best.

There's a flash of light and the smell of something singed, and Loki's body arches up off the ground. In that first split second Tony thinks it's just an unconscious reaction to the blast, but then Loki's eyes fly open and he's gasping for breath. He jerks his head to the side to stare at Tony in...

Is that shock? Rage? Probably a bit of both? Whatever it is, Tony's too caught up in the fact that those eyes are bright red against his creepy blue skin to bother caring about much else.

...No that has to be his imagination.

The visual connection lasts only a second before Loki groans and falls back onto the sand. Slowly, his eyes and skin fade back to normal human (human-ish) colors. He's breathing. He's blinking. He's awake, and best of all he's not dead.

"Jesus Christ, that did it," Tony says to break the silence. "I mean... I knew it would. I'm a genius!" And he's two for two with crazy, off-the-cuff plans tonight. He should really hit up a casino with this run of luck he has going on.

Thor rests a gentle hand on Loki's shoulder. "Brother?"

Loki just makes an unhappy little sound in reply and rolls halfway onto his side, unable to make it all the way over.

"Can you stand?"

"If I could *stand* do you think I would be..." Loki doesn't finish the sentence. More like he *can't* finish it. His words trail off into another unhappy growl, accompanied by a grimace and a shudder that rolls down his back.

Thor takes that as his cue to stand up, gathering Loki in an awkward, cradling embrace. Tony would've bet money that Loki would object to this, either through some token physical struggle or even a disapproving, if ineffective, grunt. Instead, ever a source of surprises, he wraps his arms around Thor's neck and lets himself be carried like a small child.

He must feel really, really, really bad. Or he's fucking with them. Tony will never stop being suspicious that this is, in fact, the case.

"We should leave," says Thor.

Those words are enough to snap Tony's mind back to what's important. "Right." S.H.I.E.L.D.'s helicarrier is still puttering around in the clouds, and once Fury realizes they took off it won't take him long to figure out that down is about the only place they could've gone.

"Is there somewhere nearby we can seek shelter?" Thor looks around. "What is this place?"

"Well," Tony answers, "judging by the coordinates and, more importantly, the aerial view of that coastline I'd recognize anywhere..." He spreads his arms in one big, grand gesture and feels one big, silly grin stretching across his face. "Welcome to Atlantic City."
Chapter Summary

Loki is imprisoned in Atlantic City via methods that defy the laws of physics. Thor fails at human domesticity while Tony brushes up on his interrogation skills (and also fails). The Asgardians have trouble with the concept of appropriate Earth clothing.

If 'walk through Atlantic City in a suit of armor with a Norse god carrying his unconscious adopted brother' were on Tony's bucket list, he'd now be entitled to cross it off. It's after three am by the time they finally trudge up the steps and he punches the key code into the front door. It takes four tries. His brain is officially dead for the night, which nicely matches how his body feels. All he wants to do is take a hot shower and fall into bed.

"Is this your residence?" asks Thor.

"Technically speaking, yes. It is a residence, and I paid for it. But I don't live here." He fumbles around on the wall trying to remember where the light switch is in this place. Robotic fingers lacking the sense of touch don't help. "A couple years back when I first landed on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar, they had this bad habit of showing up at my door every so often with inventive new ways to intrude on my privacy. To get some peace and quiet, I did what any reasonable billionaire would do." Now there's the switch. "I bought low-profile houses in six different states using the names of trusted employees and relatives in transactions that couldn't be directly traced back to me. Then whenever I saw Coulson's truly original black sedan roll up the drive, I could escape here or Miami or Phoenix... It's a handy backup plan. This place technically belongs to my cousin Katie, but she only uses it a few weekends out of the year."

One by one, Tony flips the switches through the front entry, into the living room, over to the kitchen, and down the hall that leads to the bedrooms. "Sleeping beauty still down for the count?"

"Loki is still unconscious if that is what you mean to ask," Thor replies.

"Yes, that is what I mean to ask. You can bring him in here."

The ice sure did a number on Loki's clothes. Everything that froze and cracked back on the beach is now in shreds, and he looks like some tattered, Dickensian orphan in gray rags as Thor sets him on the bed. The minute he's down he groans and rolls onto his side with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms protectively masking his face.

"You awake, buddy?" asks Tony. When Loki doesn't answer, he turns to Thor with a shrug. "Well, I say we call it a night. Let Loki get some rest. He's in no state to do anything but pass out, and honestly, I'm feeling the same. You okay to stand on guard duty for a while? I just need a shower and a couple hours sleep and I can relieve you."

"That won't be necessary." Thor unclips something from the back of his waistband. At first Tony thinks it's a belt, but it uncoils into... a chain? Yes, that's a length of chain, with a manacle on either end. Thor fastens one on Loki's ankle and clamps the other securely onto the handle of his hammer. "Go rest, Tony Stark. Regain your strength for tomorrow. This will hold him." He sets the hammer on the floor next to the bed.
Is he serious? "Uh... yeah, sorry, but that looks kind of easy to escape."

"This chain was forged in Asgard for the purpose of containing Loki. Its links are infused with protective magic that will allow him to neither break them nor slip their grasp."

"I meant the part where the other end of the chain is attached to your hammer, which he can just pick up and."

*What the hell?*

The hammer won't budge. Tony can try with all his strength, increased exponentially through the suit's robotics, but he can't lift that hammer. He can't slide it, he can't shift it, he can't move it at all. He can't even wiggle it. That thing might as well be a monolith of solid steel embedded straight down into the Earth's core; it's not going anywhere.

"Are you kidding me? What's this made of, dark matter?!"

"Mjölnir answers only to me and can be lifted by no other."

The hammer has a name? "...It has a name?"

Thor just frowns and doesn't answer.

"Okay then," says Tony. "I guess if Loki can't move the hammer, and as long as your magical chain of holding stays intact, we've got ourselves a prisoner." It isn't the most solid of ideas, trapping Loki with a magic chain and an object that defies the laws of physics. But then, the whole night so far hasn't exactly been full of rational plans and sensible logic. It's been more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of adventure. Maybe this is just the crowning jewel on a whole heap of crazy.

And with that in mind, shower and bed are looking better than ever. "I'll see you in the morning," he tells Thor. "Feel free to help yourself to whatever clothes you find in the dresser if you get tired of wearing..." He makes a vague gesture at Thor's armor; "all that. There's probably granola bars or crackers in the kitchen if you're hungry. And bathroom's at the end of the hall. Have a good night."

"Good night, Tony Stark."

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The dream is a good one. Tony's back at home in Malibu, lazing in the sun by the pool with a cold one in his hand. Pepper, looking pretty damn fine in a hot pink bikini, stands by the diving board as she tries to coax him into the water.

*This is life*, he thinks to himself. *This is ideal. Why the hell do I focus so much on that saving-the-world bullshit when I could be doing this instead?*

If only it could last forever. But then Agent Coulson is there, gliding in like a black cloud to blot out the sun. And the beer in Tony's hand has turned into the Tesseract, and his lounge chair is wrapping itself around his body, becoming the suit.

"We need you back at base, Mr. Stark," says Coulson.

"Do I have to go now?"
Coulson nods. "Now. Thor's about to burn down the kitchen."

ooo

Tony snaps awake to the piercing wail of a smoke alarm and the smell of burnt something. It's six-thirty in the morning, he's had less than three hours of sleep, and his head is pounding.

"Shit," he growls as he rolls out of bed. It's going to be an awesome day.

By the time he staggers into the kitchen, Thor's managed to silence the alarm by pulling it off the wall and chucking it out the patio door. If Tony were less groggy he might care, but he's not, so it's a good enough solution for now. At least there's coffee waiting.

Thor, with a painful-looking red mark stretching across three of his fingers, gestures to a crispy mess that probably used to be frozen hash browns. "Good morning, Tony Stark. I made breakfast."

"So I heard," says Tony. He can't help but wonder: what kind of kitchen gadgets exist in Asgard if Thor can figure out how to work a fancy-ass computerized coffee machine but screws up with a basic Teflon frying pan?

Also, more important: what the hell is the dress code of Asgard if Thor thinks wearing nothing but a towel is acceptable breakfast attire?

"So," Tony says after downing his first mug of caffeine. "You may not have heard me last night when I mentioned this, but feel free to help yourself to any of the clothes in your bedroom."

"Yes, I recall you said that. Thank you."

"Right. Hmm." How to put this politely? "See, the thing is," he continues, pouring another cup of coffee, "men in America tend to wear pants."

Thor nods.

"All the time."

Again, Thor nods.

"You get out of bed in the morning, you put on pants. Those pants stay on all day until you go back to bed. The only time the pants come off is when you're in the shower or changing into a different pair of pants. Or maybe shorts. Maybe."

"Understood," says Thor.

"Good. Now that brings us to the question of why you are not wearing pants."

Frowning, Thor glances down at his towel. "I plan to dress when it's time to leave this residence."

"I think you missed a crucial part of my message just now about getting out of bed and immediately putting on pants."

"And I would do so, were we entertaining guests or were there ladies present. But as we are here alone, you and I and Loki, I see no reason to trouble myself with clothing."

"Ah."

The super rescue team is less than a day old, and already they're arguing about the uniform. Too bad it's not open for discussion. "How about this. New house rule: pants are non-negotiable."
Unless you're in your bedroom, or in the bathroom, you wear pants. Capiche?"

Thor looks ready to counter with some Asgardian illogic, but Tony beats him to the punch. "My house, my rules. If we ever go to your place I'll be sure to make myself at home and hang around your kitchen wearing a glorified loincloth, but here on Earth we wear pants. Suit up, bro."

And that's that. Thor isn't happy about it, but as long as he agrees to get dressed Tony can deal with a bit of sulking. Especially if he sulks off down the hall and takes his towel with him.

"And before I see anything that can't be unseen," Tony calls after him, "the pants rule applies to Loki too."

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This is the plan: after breakfast, Tony heads out to pick up some necessary supplies. He's wearing a cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses, and driving the Mitsubishi Lancer somebody left in the garage, so that should be enough to convince the general public he's a giant d-bag who should be neither talked to nor looked at. The best of disguises. Meanwhile, Thor stays at home to work on prying any info he can get out of Loki. They're now in direct competition with S.H.I.E.L.D. in the race to track down the Tesseract. And while S.H.I.E.L.D. might have access to a lot more resources for the time being, at least Tony and Thor have the guy who actually knows where the damn thing is. If only he'll talk.

"Okay," says Tony, dumping an armload of plastic bags on the kitchen counter. "Food. You know how to cook?"

Thor shoots the stove a glare of disapproval. "Um. No. You?"

"I've been known to throw together a sandwich or microwave the occasional Hot Pocket. Anyway, I stocked up on bachelor chow. You know, stuff you can just heat up or even eat right out of the package. Got some frozen pizza, Chef Boyardee, baked beans, peanut butter, bread, a pack of ham, and my personal favorite-" he pauses to hold up the box: "Cinnamon Toast Crunch. You have to try this."

"Why do the little toast squares have faces?" asks Thor.

"That, my friend, is one of the great mysteries of the universe," says Tony. "Unfortunately, it'll have to wait for another day because right now we have bigger problems on the table."

"The Tesseract."

"Bingo. Did Loki talk?"

"No." Shaking his head, Thor looks briefly in the direction of the living room. A wall blocks everything from view, but Tony can hear the faint babbling noise of the TV in the background. Loki's apparently there, and he's watching something that sounds like daytime soaps. "Loki will not speak to me. Not a word."

"You want me to have a go at him?" Tony asks. Oh please let me have a go at him. I spent the whole morning driving around like some blue-collar asshole, listening to screaming children at the supermarket, and I'd really love to do some screaming of my own.

"I cannot say what luck you will have, but you are welcome to try."

Yes. Yes, he will try. Because this whole damn rescue mission will have been for nothing if they
can't get Loki to spill the beans. "I'll see what I can do," he tells Thor. "Meanwhile, I nominate you for kitchen duty today, so make me a ham sandwich. Light on the mayo. Lots of mustard."

"But I've never made-" Thor starts.

"And I've never interrogated a bad guy," Tony cuts him off. "It'll be a day for branching out and trying new things. Just use your imagination, champ. And by the way," he adds, giving Thor a thumbs up, "I like the new outfit. That's a good look on you: pants. Stick with it."

They must have sarcasm on Asgard, because Thor knots his eyebrows like he's trying to figure out whether or not Tony's serious. He shoots a quick look down at his clothes - gray sweats that are at least six inches too short and a tight, faded Lakers shirt - and blinks. "...Thanks?"

ooo

Loki's on the couch in the living room just like Tony guessed. He's in the same position as the night before, curled up like a cat with his arms wrapped around his head, facing away from whatever crap's playing on TV. And he's wearing... a towel. Son of a bitch, what's with these Asgardians? A pair of gray sweats that match Thor's have been carefully draped across his legs, along with a Nagano '98 t-shirt over his shoulders, but underneath that it's just the goddamn towel. His hair is damp and clinging to the back of his neck. He looks a lot like somebody who was probably dumped in the shower against his will.

All in all, Tony's glad he was out of the house for that scene.

"I think you missed the conversation about the house pants rule," he says, taking a seat on the recliner next to Loki's couch. Just outside of arm's reach because, well, he's kind of fond of being alive at the moment and there's no telling what Loki might try. "I'm going to have to ask you to get dressed now."

"Please feel free to go kill yourself, Tony Stark," Loki growls.

"Hey, you can talk!" Not the words Tony wants to hear, but did he expect anything better? No, not really. It's still a start. "That's great. I'm really proud of you. This is a big step on the road to recovery."

"Recovery," says Loki, and he sounds like he's sneering.

"Yeah. In case you don't remember, you almost died last night. I pretty much saved your ass. Actually, I saved it twice, since first I sprung you from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s prison, then I Frankensteined you back from near death. Out of the goodness of my heart, I might add, and at great personal risk. Now common decency dictates that you owe me one. A big one. But I'm willing to wipe the slate clean and call it even if you just tell me where you hid the Tesseract."

"Oh, of course," says Loki. "That would be the least I can do to repay you for your valiant deeds."

This is the point at which Tony knows beyond a doubt that they have sarcasm on Asgard.

Slowly, Loki begins to unfold his body from its cramped and huddled position. It's a long, awkward process, and his movements are jerky. Stiff. Like every single little motion of every single little muscle causes him pain. Inch by inch, he pulls himself into a sitting position, shrugging off the shirt and sweats and kicking aside the chain that's still attached to his ankle. Once up, he sits with his shoulders hunched forward and his arms crossed over his chest like armor.
It's not enough to hide the tell-tale signs of damage done. The whole expanse of his skin from shoulders down to hips is a mess of scars, only they don't look like any scars Tony's ever seen in his life. These markings are completely alien: shimmering, pearly white in chaotic patterns of blotches like spattered paint, tinged with purple and blue. Some of them are whorled with deep-cut lines where Loki's skin has simply... disappeared. Whatever caused this didn't originate with S.H.I.E.L.D. or Nick Fury. Hell, it didn't even originate on Earth. Whatever caused this is strong enough to wreak havoc on an immortal and is beyond anything Tony's ever experienced first-hand.

He's pretty sure he can guess exactly what that 'whatever' is, but jumping to conclusions isn't an exercise he wants to do just yet.

"What did they do to you?" he asks Loki. The words come out shakier than he intended. Too guilt-ridden. Too invested.

"Why do you care?" Loki counters.

"Because I just risked a whole hell of a lot to save you. The least you can do is tell me what I saved you from."

"That's not what I asked, Tony Stark. I asked you why you care. Why did you bother to 'save' me? Why did you think you needed to do so?"

"I didn't agree with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s methodology."

A thin smile begins to play across Loki's lips. "Still not what I asked."

"And you still haven't answered my original question about where you hid the Tesseract."

Loki says nothing more. The thin smile stays right in place, maybe even sliding into a smirk. Tony leans back in the recliner and folds his hands across his chest, his eyes stuck on Loki's. Is this going to turn into a staring contest? Okay then. Tony can do staring contests. Just shove all those inconvenient feelings of pity and shame down out of the way, bury them in the dark corners of his heart where he puts stuff he wants to forget about (there are a lot of dark corners), and try to concentrate instead on how much he'd like to punch that smug, towel-wearing bastard in the face.

"How about this," Loki finally says to break the silence, though he doesn't break eye contact. "I merely want to know why you care so much about my well-being. You've personally killed, what, dozens of people? Indirectly killed thousands? More? And yet you risk your life and livelihood to save me from those who profess to be on your side. In fact, if I recall, you were the one who took me to them in the first place. So why the change of heart, Tony Stark? After all the blood you've shed over the years, why the sudden adherence morality and altruistic mercy? Because I cannot believe that all of this is the result of one disagreement with 'S.H.I.E.L.D.'s methodology."

Now it's Tony's turn to be the silent one, though he's not smiling. Loki's words are more than just words. They're barbs of malice that send a jolt of... something straight through his veins and down into all those dark corners. He can't quite place the feeling. Guilt? Fear? Anger? Panic? Hatred? All of the above, rolled up into one big ball of bad memories alongside a bit of humiliation for good measure? That might be it. And it's not something he can easily shrug off. It rolls around in the pit of his stomach, crashing through barriers and flattening all those shady crevices where secrets like to hide, dredging up all the things he doesn't want to think about. That he never wants to think about.

Carefully, he weaves his fingers together, drumming them against his hands. He whistles out a long breath between his teeth and tries to ignore the prickles of sweat forming on the back of his
neck. *Just keep up the façade of calm disinterest.*

"Tell me why you *care,*" Loki presses. "Tell me, and..." He pauses, probably for dramatic effect like the arrogant little prima donna he is; "I shall tell something about the Tesseract. Do we have a bargain?"

"Sorry. I don't think so. First you tell me about the Tesseract. Then I see if your information is worth a reward."

Loki laughs. "You do not trust me?"

"Not as far as I can throw you," says Tony. "And since you have a magic hammer made of dark matter chained to your ankle, that's not going to be very far at all."

"Then we are at an impasse."

"Yep." They were at an impasse.

"In that case, do you mind if I lie down again? As you may have noticed, I have quite a bit of damage to repair, and healing such injuries requires a vast investment of energy."

"Knock yourself out."

"Of course, we can still talk," Loki adds.

*Oh goody.*

Once again Loki begins the laborious process of changing position. It takes the same straining effort. The same stilted movements and little hisses of discomfort through a clenched jaw. He looks, Tony can't help but think, like an injured spider trying to cope with too many arms and legs when he only has the strength for one at a time. When he finally makes it down, he keeps his eyes closed for a minute and just breathes. He only opens them again once he's back in pill bug formation with his knees hugged to his chest.

This time he's facing towards the TV with his head tilted to look straight at Tony. It may or may not be an improvement.

"Perhaps if you tell me *why* you need the Tesseract, I may be more inclined to cooperate," says Loki.

It's an improvement. Now that Loki's grinning up at him like a jackass jackal, the conflicting storm of emotions in Tony's gut has all but disappeared. He's back to wanting to punch Loki in the face. "I dunno," he answers. "Maybe to stop you taking over the world? Just a guess."

"Ah, but you *have* stopped me. Here I am, entirely stopped. Chained up on your furniture and wearing naught but a towel."

Why does he have to draw Tony's attention back to that damn towel? "Am I supposed to believe your hired goons aren't out there right now working on your plan in your absence?"

"Oh, they likely are. But they won't execute the final stage until I give my orders. You need not worry so much. Your beloved Earth is safe. For now." He punctuates the last with a wide grin.

"For some strange reason I get the feeling you're just a huge asshole who likes wasting everyone's time," Tony mutters, mostly to himself.
Loki laughs. Then, abruptly, changes the topic. "How many days has it been since Stuttgart?"

"That was Saturday," says Tony. "Today's Thursday. You do the math."

Loki's smile falters just the smallest bit, and for a second Tony swears he can see a ripple of something other than imperious dickishness pass across his face. That something looks like it might be saying, 'Oh shit'. "I want to see Thor now," he snaps.

"I want you to tell me where the Tesseract is now," Tony replies.

"I need to see Thor now."

"And I need you to tell me where the Tesseract is. You tell me, you can see Thor. You can see him, talk to him, poke him with a stick, whatever you want."

The smile disappears completely, and Loki rolls onto his back to stare at the ceiling.

"Aw, you don't like that? Is it silent treatment time?"

By the lack of answer, Tony is forced to accept that yes, it is. Sighing, he stands up. "Okay. Fine. You can see Thor. Maybe you can tell him where the Tesseract is."

Still no answer. Loki has turned into a petulant teenager. "Sit tight, big boy," says Tony. "I'll send your brother in, then I'll be back later for round two."

Tony leaves the living room with a couple more pieces of information than when he entered. The most important seems to be that Loki's not happy about today being Thursday. Did he lose track of time during all those hours of unconsciousness? Did he miss a deadline, or is something about to happen? Most intriguing: is it possible that he fucked up?

Now there are a few interesting things to mull over.
Asgardians are a Cuddly People

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to fix up his armor while the Asgardians do nothing but watch TV. Later, when Thor needs to contact Heimdall, Tony takes the opportunity to learn everything he never wanted to know about Loki’s magic and how the God of Assholes just needs a hug. Literally. Needs.

Against all odds, the ham sandwich Thor made is the best Tony's ever had. Hands down. He went all out and must have used three different kinds of mustard, plus a perfect, light layer of mayo with a hint of black pepper and... is that brown sugar? Whatever it is, it's amazing, and Tony wishes he'd had the foresight to ask for two. Or five. And another side plate of little triangular cheese slices and pickle rounds. (Thor really thought of everything.)

Tony always thinks best when he's working, so he's come up to the mini workshop on the second floor to tinker with his suit. Currently, it's in about forty pieces scattered all over the carpet from his hasty and not exactly careful removal the night before. He needs to stick it back into some kind of working order. Easier said than done: this workshop isn't anywhere close to his normal standards. He remembers shipping some old stuff out here a year ago, enough for a bare-bones startup operation, but somehow fully outfitting a house in Atlantic City never really reached the top of his priorities list. Or even unpacking the crates.

And now in the absence of sufficient robotic help he's trying to get sand out of finger joints with a toothbrush and a hair dryer he found in the bathroom.

Just forget about the sand, he tells himself. Think about Loki. What's that dick up to? Funny enough, usually he's giving the opposite advice: concentrate on the job and don't think too much about the cocksucker who's trying to enslave the planet. Apparently this means that, at the moment, Loki is less annoying than sand.

So he'll just work it through. Logically. Starting point? Loki said his minions wouldn't activate anything until he gave the order. If this is true, that gives Tony and Thor an advantage: they could have days at their disposal to convince Loki that he doesn’t really want to destroy the world and he should let them take the Tesseract. Or S.H.I.E.L.D. could find it first. And would that be so bad? Well, for Tony, Thor and Loki, yes. For the rest of the world, maybe not. It'd be back to status quo.

But then there's always the possibility Loki was lying about having to give the order to start up the doomsday device. Actually, there's a real good chance Loki was lying, since lying, bullshitting, twisting the truth, misleading and deceiving seem to be all he ever does. In that case... maybe Loki’s so twitchy because the doomsday device has already been activated. Maybe that alien army Thor told everyone about is on its way right now. Maybe Tony should stop screwing around with a hairdryer and just suit up, sand and all.

He switches the hairdryer off and listens. The house is quiet. Not a sound from downstairs. No Loki struggling to escape, no Thor wrestling him to the ground to stop him. Still though, it's been almost two hours. Maybe he should go check on them. He has this feeling in his gut that trying to keep Loki imprisoned is kind of like trying to keep oil in a basket, no matter what Thor says about
enchanted chains and magic hammers. He heads down.

"Guys?"

No answer. But the TV is on, playing something full of explosions and yelling.

"Guys?"

This time, Thor answers, "We're in the television room."

Good. That means no doomsday and no escape. That he knows of. Yet. Tony grabs a granola bar as he passes through the kitchen on his way to join Thor. When he rounds the wall separating the kitchen from the living room, he stops. The Asgardians have changed clothes in the two hours he was upstairs. Thor's still wearing pants, but he's lost his shirt. Loki's gained a shirt, but still no pants. And if that were the weirdest thing about the scene in the living room, Tony would consider himself lucky. But he's not lucky.

Thor and Loki are cuddled up together on the couch. Loki's eyes are shut as his head rests on Thor's shoulder, Thor's arm is draped over Loki's back to hold him close, and the two of them look all too comfortable. And when Thor's eyes flick up to notice Tony's presence... nothing changes. There's no momentary freeze or flinch accompanied by a horrified expression of 'oh god you caught me snuggling with my brother'. Nor is there any mad scramble away, pretending they weren't just doing what they were doing. Instead, there's nothing more than a slow, even nod of acknowledgement from Thor to Tony. A simple gesture that says, 'We're good here'. Meanwhile, his confident posture says, 'We do this all the time back home. Everyone does. There, it's totally normal for two grown brothers to cuddle on the couch like bunnies. Not at all weird.'

Tony, unsure of the correct social protocol for this kind of situation, just stands where he is. Staring. Trying not to stare. Seriously, where the hell should he be looking? He settles for gluing his eyes to the TV. At least it's a show about exploding cars.

"Do you wish to sit?" asks Thor.

"Oh... uh..." No. "Sure?" He takes his place on the recliner again, sitting just on the edge in case things go downhill and he has to make a quick getaway. He opens his mouth to say something meaningless to break the tension, maybe about ham sandwiches or how much he hates sand, but the words that come out are, "How's Loki?" And he could kick himself for asking, because of all the potential conversation topics in the world, cuddly Loki is about the last one he wants to broach.

It gets worse when Loki, whom he'd assumed was asleep again, opens his eyes and smirks. "I'm so touched that you care, Tony Stark."

Fucking hell, when is he going to drop that?

"I think you are feeling much better, are you not?" Thor asks, speaking as much to Tony as to Loki.

"Oh yes," Loki answers. "Everything is lovely now."

He flashes Thor the most insincere smile, which Thor returns, sincerely. "You look better," says Thor.

Tony has to admit that's true. Loki's face no longer has the sunken grayness and waxy pallor it did earlier. He looks healthier. He looks almost normal, despite the lack of pants and the way his hair has dried in erratic loose curls sticking up all over his head, kind of flattened on one side.
He looks less normal when he scooches up closer to his brother, closing his eyes again as he presses his face against Thor's shoulder and wraps his arms more tightly around Thor's waist. Then Thor reciprocates by smoothing down Loki's absurd hair while leaning in to his ear to whisper something too soft for Tony to hear.

"Okay!" Tony says brightly, jumping up from his seat. "Thor, can we have a team meeting in the kitchen?"

This is how Tony begins: "As an employer, whenever I need to ream out one of my workers, I like to start off on a positive note. So, positive note: that was one epic ham sandwich you made. I mean it. Really good. I want you to make a whole plate of them for dinner. Now. Um. ...Did you notice that? The 'um'? The bad part always comes after the 'um', which I like to insert because it makes it sound like this is hard for me. Like I have to stall and search for those tough, disciplinary words. The 'um' softens the blow. And with that in mind..." He points to the living room wall. "Um, what the actual fuck?"

"I do not understand what you mean by that," says Thor. He's frowning just the smallest bit, brow ever so slightly creased in innocent confusion and concern. "Tony Stark, if you worry that I am in danger of being gulled by my brother, let me assure you: I do not trust him. But if it please you, I will pursue no action where he is concerned without first asking your opinion to ensure my judgment is sound and unclouded by our past."

Huh. "Well that's... that's very wise of you, Thor." Wise, but not at all what Tony was asking. "Thanks. But actually I just wanted to know what was up with you two being cuddle-bunnies on the couch."

Thor's frown deepens. "Is that problematic? He is my brother."

"Yeah, that's kind of why it's problematic. Most brothers here on Earth don't really do that kind of thing after age five or so."

"Truly?" And now his frown has changed to something sadder. "I am sorry to hear. Why is that so?"

"Because... it's kind of a little weird?" Tony offers.

"But surely the men of Midgard are not so cold-hearted as to feign they do not love their brothers!"

Tony shakes his head. "It's kind of a lot weird."

"Hm," says Thor. He still has that sad look, like he pities all the repressed clods on Earth who don't buy into the free love hippie revolution. "On Asgard, it is different. We do not fear what is in our hearts." Then, as if that's that and the matter's closed, cuddle-bunny heads back to the living room.

"Wait wait wait."

Tony's call stops him. Thor turns around, expectant.

"So you're saying," Tony begins, "just so I'm clear on this, back on Asgard everybody would be fine with you cuddling. Also fine with not wearing any pants. Maybe even cuddling while not wearing any pants."
"Yes," Thor confirms.

"Okay then."

Long, awkward pause. Thor raises his eyebrows in a silent question: are you done?

Asgardians are a cuddly people. Or maybe they're just a people incapable of doing anything in half-measures. They wage wars that span worlds and declare their love just as grandly. They are a people completely unfamiliar with the phrase 'tone it down'. They are a living, breathing Japanese cartoon.

"I'm going back upstairs," says Tony.

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It's almost nine when Thor comes up to see him. By this time, Tony's given up on sand removal and is slouched against the wall with his helmet on, talking to Jarvis about the potential pitfalls (many) of trying to remotely access the bug he planted on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s network to see whether or not Banner's script has managed to pick up any hint of the Tesseract. (Verdict: too risky.)

"Tony Stark?"

Tony pulls off the helmet, partly because he can see better without it but mostly because he knows he looks dumb wearing it with his jeans. As soon as it's off, he realizes he shouldn't have bothered. For either reason.

Once again Thor has managed to change clothes. Only this time he's back to the towel, paired with Loki's Nagano shirt. However that came about, Tony decides he doesn't want to know.

"Yes, Thor?"

"I must make my report back to Asgard. Loki said up here would be best."

"For any special reason, or just to bother me?"

Thor pauses to think about that. "Likely to bother you," he admits. "Apologies. I should have thought--"

"No, it's okay." Tony rolls the helmet aside to join the rest of the armor heap and stands up. "I need to get some food anyway. You can... uh... How do you contact Asgard? You need me to help you rig up some kind of E.T.-Phone-Home machine?"

"No machine is necessary," says Thor. "I need only call out to Heimdall and he will hear."

"You're going to yell into space?"

"Yes."

Considering everything else that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, that actually doesn't sound totally unreasonable. "Let me know how it goes. I'll be downstairs. Is Loki still on the couch?"

"No," says Thor, and he looks down as if he might be able to see up through the floor to the room below. "He was hungry. I left him seated in the kitchen."

Loki in the kitchen. Something about that sounds like it has the potential for endless disaster.
Tony, as the only trustworthy and mature adult in the house, better get downstairs.

"Wait, Tony Stark." Thor grabs his hand before he's two steps away. His hand. And then keeps holding it. Asgardians really are too lovey-dovey. "Beware. Loki is plotting something, and I believe it involves you."

"Of course he is," says Tony. "He's the God of Assholes."

Thor's expression, which until now Tony would have described as 'perpetually mildly concerned', shifts into 'disturbed and disbelieving'. It's a feeling Tony knows well.

"I didn't mean literally," he says, but it's too late. The mental image is already there. "Oh hell."

"Be careful, my friend," says Thor. "Do not listen to him, and, more importantly, do not let him touch you."

Tony raises an eyebrow, but Thor doesn't elaborate. He just stands there looking mildly concerned again, as if this is a common warning in Asgard and Tony should know what he's talking about. Casually, Tony pulls his hand out of Thor's grip. "Okay, thanks. Good thing I was already planning on not letting that happen, ever."

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Down in the kitchen, Loki's sitting on a stool at the island, loudly sucking up the dregs of a juice box. He's wearing a burgundy chenille throw blanket like a toga. By this point, Tony doesn't even care any more.

"Are you going to tell me where the Tesseract is now?" he asks as he opens the fridge. It's time for another ham sandwich.

"Are you going to tell me what drove you to free me from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s prison?" Loki returns.

"No."

"Then we are still at an impasse."

Loki doesn't say anything else the whole time Tony makes the sandwich and microwaves a can of beans. He also doesn't say anything when Tony takes a seat at the island across from him. He just sits there sucking on that damn juice box and breaking a Triscuit into successively smaller pieces, rolling bits of crumbs between his fingers.

He looks worse again, shaky and too pale with shadowed eyes. But the bizarre pearly scars have healed a little, at least from what Tony can see: some of the ridges have disappeared and the purple-blue sheen is starting to fade. It still looks like it hurts, though, judging from the way he sits with his shoulders hunched and his head down.

Tony's always considered it a dipshit move when people point out you resemble something the cat dragged in. So that's exactly what he does. "You know, you were looking a lot better in the living room earlier," he says through a mouthful of beans. "Now you have that vampiric emo pallor again."

Loki rolls his eyes. He actually rolls his eyes. It makes him look even more emo. "I told you, a great deal of energy is required to heal my injuries. The extent of that energy expenditure has certain consequences. Some of them manifest outwardly."
"What about the cuddling? Is being weird and cuddly some kind of side effect?"

"No more than wearing a splint is a side effect of having a broken arm," Loki answers.

Tony freezes halfway through a bite of sandwich once he realizes what Loki means. "Wait, cuddling is the treatment?"

He's pretty sure he's sporting the same disturbed/disbelieving expression Thor had upstairs, because Loki's smile just got way too wide. "Physical contact is a means to realign energy balances," Loki explains.

"Are you serious?" asks Tony. "Because this sounds like the plot for a Care Bears episode where the evil wizard uses too much black magic but everything can be set right through the healing power of hugs."

When Loki keeps smiling, Tony has the feeling he's stumbled way closer to the truth than he really wants to be. "Allow me to show you," says Loki. "Give me your hand."

Without thinking, Tony reaches out across the island. It's only when Loki's fingers brush his that he remembers Thor's warning.

Do not let him touch you.

Too late. Loki has Tony's hand in his grasp. As soon as there's contact, a jolt like an electric shock shoots up Tony's arm and straight through his body. With a shout, he yanks his hand away - no mean feat considering Loki has a grip like a pit bull's jaws.

"What was that?!"

"The residue of magic."

"Actual magic or 80s rock ballad magic?"

Loki ignores him, which might be for the best. "Though I hesitate to use the word 'magic' since it will surely bring to mind your cultural stereotypes of bearded men in pointy hats."

He's right. It does.

"Whenever I call upon any magical powers, it results in the accumulation of an equal amount of... let's call it inert magic. In small amounts, this has little impact. It eventually fades. But an excess of inert magic, built up when too much power is used in too short a time, can have negative consequences. I need to transfer it to someone else while drawing in new energy from that person at the same time."

"Right," says Tony. What he actually means is, 'Yeah right.'

"You don't believe me."

Tony shakes his head. "No. And not just the magic energy transfer, which - don't get me wrong - is ridiculous, but I'm more disbelieving of your sincerity in telling me all this. Why divulge your weakness?"

"I never said it was a weakness."

"You distinctly said 'negative consequences'."
"Did I specify that they were negative only for me?" And he grins again, the slimy bastard. "Your discomfort amuses me. I enjoy watching your limited human mind struggle with concepts fit only for gods."

Oh, this is going well. Why does he always let himself get sucked into these stupid arguments? *Back on track, Stark. Focus on the reason you started talking to this douchebag in the first place.* Only his mouth has other ideas. "If you want, I can start talking about aeronautical engineering. It'd be fun to watch you try to wrap your godly mind around some hyperbolic partial differentiation equations." *Not what you were supposed to say, genius.*

"Please do," says Loki. "Your realm is adorable, how your people think themselves so clever for learning how to bend light with magnets. Stunning science!"

"Science is what happens when you do *real* things instead of making up sparkly wizard hocus-pocus."

"I could demonstrate the reality of magic by conjuring a three-headed serpent that spits acid, if you like. Or shape-shifting you into a spider, though that may be unpleasant for both of us. You're far more tolerable in this form, with the correct number of legs."

"Okay, stop it," Tony says. He sets down his spoon, puts both hands flat on the countertop, and takes a deep breath. "We are both grown-ups here. At least physically. This is getting silly. I probably shouldn't mock you for not knowing about things that your average tenth-grade dropout could understand, and you probably shouldn't threaten to turn me into an arachnid. Let's start this conversation over."

He takes another breath. And another, because refocusing and getting himself back on track is in order. Actually, a drink is in order. He gets up, pours himself a glass of scotch (lots), and takes his seat again with the bottle in his hand. Better.

"Hi, Loki. How are you this evening? You want a drink?"

Without bothering to answer, Loki picks up his juice box. It's pretty much empty: only a few drops of unnatural pink liquid loiter in the straw.

"You want another juice box?"

Loki shrugs and looks away, but eventually nods yes.

"Alright," says Tony. "I can get you another juice box. Just need you to tell me one thing first. You tell me where the Tesseract is, I give you a juice box. In fact, I'll give you a whole lot of juice boxes. I will buy you a big-ass truckload of juice boxes. As many as you want, whatever kind you want. But for the love of Christ, tell me where the Tesseract is so we can stop this stupid charade and get back to our lives."

Leaning back on his stool and folding his hands behind his neck, Loki looks like he might seriously consider the offer. *Oh please oh please consider the offer you crazy fucker.* He runs his tongue over his teeth and makes a face like he's thinking. Of course it's probably a show just for Tony, but still, just because Loki won't listen to reason doesn't mean he won't listen to a bribe...

"I can tell you," he says slowly, "where the Tesseract *isn't.*"

Well that's... a start.

"Fine," Tony agrees. "Tell me where it *isn't* and you get one juice box." Then maybe they can
move on to more pressing topics. Like where the damn thing actually is.

"It isn't in Sweden," says Loki.

Tony nods. "Good. I was hoping we wouldn't have to go all the way over there."

"It isn't in Spain. Nor is it in Switzerland."

"Is it anywhere in Europe?"

"Ah-ah-ah," he interrupts with a smug grin, "it is my turn to speak. You listen. The Tesseract is not in South Korea. It's not in Saskatchewan. It's not in Shanghai. And it's not in Stanford or Singapore. In fact," he adds, snapping his fingers, "it's not anywhere that begins with an S."

"Nowhere with an S. Got it. And?"

"I want my juice box now."

"Not yet. You get your juice when I get a satisfactory amount of information."

Loki dips his head to the side like he's trying to be coy or some shit and looks up at Tony with wide Bambi eyes. "But I have given you satisfactory information, Tony Stark," he says, and licks his lips. The creepy fuck. "You're merely too blinded by your own conceit to see it."

ooo

It's always easiest to think of five hundred things to worry about when you're alone in bed in the silent dark. All the problems of the day have this tendency to boil down into one concentrated nugget of anxiety. Before falling asleep, these are the things Tony thinks about:

1) Fuck Loki goddamn motherfucking fuck.

2) Why is that dickbag just passively hanging out and not trying to escape? Does he really love pissing me off that much or is there some other reason?

3) Yeah there has to be some other reason.

4) Son of a bitch, I'm going to punch him in the junk.

5) And what's up with his cryptic mumbo-jumbo? Is he really giving me clues about the Tesseract, or is he just trying to make me think he's giving me clues to waste my time?


7) Nick Fury is going to kill me.

8) Jesus Christ, Pepper is going to kill me! I need to talk to her.

9) I wonder if she knows I ditched S.H.I.E.L.D.?

10) Of course she knows. Fury or Coulson would've gone straight to her the minute they noticed I took off.

11) Oh shit, what if they think Loki kidnapped me and I'm now his prisoner? What if that's what they told Pepper?
12) Is that worse than everyone thinking he's my prisoner?

13) Yes.

14) Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

15) This was all a terrible idea and I've made a huge mistake.

16) Also I forgot to shave this morning and now I probably look like a hobo.

17) I hate my life.
This Definitely Constitutes Sexual Harassment

Chapter Summary

The location of the Tesseract is discovered, Thor pulls some devious shit worthy of his much-maligned younger brother, Loki is burdened with glorious sex magic, and Tony hates his life. In that order. As a bonus, casual/undesirable nudity happens.

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you so much to everyone who's been reading and sending me comments and kudos! It makes me so happy to know that people are enjoying this story, and I'm totally floored by the wonderful things that have been said in the comments. Thank you!

Second, the tags up there note that this story is "crack treated seriously", but, um... I think this chapter may be more crack than serious. So yeah. That's a thing that happened. It'll turn more serious than crack after this.

Once morning rolls around, things are looking better. Tony sleeps solidly until quarter after eight, then avoids having to deal with real life for a while by spending half an hour on the john reading a year-old Time magazine. After a nice hot shower and shave he's feeling refreshed, regenerated, and ready to face whatever Loki-batshit the day throws at him.

In the kitchen, somebody's already cleaned up the breakfast dishes and wiped down all countertop surfaces. There's a fresh pot of coffee brewing and a ham sandwich waiting in the fridge. Tony's not sure how it's possible, but Thor actually makes a pretty good housewife. And Loki makes a pretty good snotty teenage goth son. Maybe this is what it's like to have a family. (The kind of family that drives men to become workaholics and spend every waking hour at the office.)

"Morning, family," he says as he joins them in the living room. They're cuddling and watching TV again: a home improvement show about building a deck. Loki's still wearing a towel instead of pants, but at least Thor's fully dressed, so that's an improvement over yesterday. Tony will take what he can get.

"Good morning, Tony Stark," Thor replies. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby. You?"

He gives Loki a dark, sideways glare. "No." Loki all-too-innocently ignores him.

"You know this house has four bedrooms, right?" Tony asks them. "You don't have to share."

The two of them exchange a look, then turn to Tony with matching expressions that seem to say, 'Oh silly Tony Stark, we are creepy space brothers. Why would we not share a bedroom (and therefore also a bed because there is only one room in this house with bunk beds that your bitchy
cousin Katie insisted on for her little hellions, and you already have a sinking feeling we're not in there?"
"Just a suggestion," Tony mutters. "Don't mind me, it's only my house and my planet, what would I know about appropriate behavior?"

As expected, Thor and Loki don't mind him. They're already back to watching TV. Tony lets them for a couple minutes longer, mostly because he likes how staring mindlessly at a screen keeps Loki's mouth shut. But the clock's ticking away, and he can't afford to waste any more time than he already has. "So. Thor. Plans for today. I think we should have a team meeting in the kitchen."

"Why not here?"

"Because Loki is here, and he's not part of the team, and we don't want him overhearing our secret plans for world un-domination."

Now, the reasonable thing for Thor to do here would have been to stand up and go to the kitchen. However, since 'reasonable' and 'Asgardian' are mutually exclusive these days, what he actually does is pick up Loki, hammer and all, and haul him kicking and screaming off down the hallway. (Well, maybe more like squirming and cursing, to be fair.) When Thor returns, it's with a smile of smug accomplishment. "Loki is removed."

"Oooooookay," says Tony. Not what he was expecting, but who can argue with the result? He'll just ignore that loud, repetitive banging coming from the bedroom and pretend Loki isn't trashing anything he cares about. Push that to the back of his mind. "Right. Commence team meeting. First item on the agenda: did Loki divulge any ground-breaking new information this morning?"

"No," Thor replies as he sits back down on the couch. "Did he say anything to you last night?"

"Some garbage about conjuring serpents and turning me into a spider. Typical charismatic Loki stuff. He also maligned science and told me a bunch of places where the Tesseract wasn't. Sweden. Switzerland. Spain. Those names mean anything special to you?"

Thor shakes his head: no. Tony hadn't really thought they would, but it's still a disappointment to see yet another dead end. "They have to mean something," he insists, maybe mostly to himself. "Something made Loki choose those places. Sweden, okay, I get why he'd pick that, but I don't get Saskatchewan and Stanford. Why those two? What's the reason? And there'd better be a reason outside of 'list a bunch of random names that'll drive Tony Stark nuts when he tries to connect them'."

He sighs as he rubs his face, pressing his fingers into his eyes and swearing under his breath. Really, he should've punched Loki when he felt the urge. "Singapore. Shanghai. South Korea. Stanford. Saskatchewan. Spain. Switzerland. Sweden." Listing the places again doesn't help. "Loki said he'd given me satisfactory information. Do you think he meant it and he'd actually given me enough clues to figure this out, or would he just say that to throw me off track and lead me on a wild goose chase?"

Thor looks almost apologetic as he breaks the bad news. "Both are equally valid possibilities with Loki."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that. But I guess all we can do for now is assume he did give us the info we need and try to figure out what that is."
So what did he divulge? All that stuff about his magic... probably not relevant. The threats... also probably not relevant. The place names would be relevant. What else was there? Not much, apart from a couple snide comments about the superiority of magic over science, which-

And Tony's train of thought comes to a sudden, crashing halt. What exactly did Loki say? 'Bend light with magnets?' Why would he use that specific example unless...

"Thor," he says, doing his best to speak calmly despite a great big bubble of HOLY FUCKING SHIT rapidly expanding in his chest. "Do you have particle accelerator physics on Asgard?"

"I do not think we have those words on Asgard," answers Thor. "Why?"

"What Loki told me last night." Tony jumps up; he can't help it. "Bending light with magnets! It's a crude oversimplification of what a synchrotron accelerator does, but it's probably what someone like Loki would understand if someone like Dr. Selvig tried to explain it to him. All those places he named are the sites of accelerator labs around the world. Sweden has MAX, Spain has ALBA, and in Switzerland, the granddaddy of them all: CERN. So what he means when says the Tesseract isn't at any of those places is...?" He pauses to see if Thor's on the same wavelength and can see where he's going with this.

No. Thor looks lost. Oh well.

"He means it is at a similar facility! Which makes complete sense and son of a bitch, I can't believe I didn't think of this before. Whatever his little followers are doing, they'll need access to a lot of specific equipment to build their doomsday device. Naturally, Selvig would know where to get it. And that also explains why Banner was unable to track the radiation output if they're hiding in a radiation-shielded lab." Tony's pacing now. He forces himself to stop. "D'you think Loki's the kind of guy who hide his loot in the safest, farthest possible place, like Australia, or would he try to pull this off right under our noses while laughing about how ignorant we are? My guess is... option two."

"Option two," Thor agrees.

"Then suit up," says Tony. "I think I know where the Tesseract is."

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There's just one problem with Tony 'n' Thor's preferred battle tactic of flying off to deal with whatever comes up as it comes up. This time, they actually need a plan.

It's like one of those classic fox-chicken-corn problems. Thor can't fly without his hammer, but if he takes the hammer that leaves Loki free to escape. So if Thor goes, Tony has to stay behind to guard Loki. If Tony goes, Thor has to leave the hammer, but he can't do much without it so he might as well stay home too. Because hell if they're bringing Loki along with them.

To Tony, the answer is obvious. "I go alone. I can fly up there, blast in, grab the cube, and be back here in a couple hours tops. You hang out with Loki, watch some TV, maybe cuddle a bit like you seem to enjoy so much. Before you know it I'll be back with your ticket home."

"Now wait, Tony Stark."

He's grabbing Tony's hand again. When they're done with this Tesseract business, Tony's going to have to sit him down to have a talk about boundaries, personal space, and all the numerous things that could be considered sexual harassment.
"The Tesseract is a relic of Asgard that once belonged to my father. I know its power. In its awakened state, you will be unable to maintain prolonged contact, especially when you wear your metal armor. The energy may overwhelm and destroy you."

"I'm willing to take that risk," says Tony.

"And this?" asks Thor, reaching up to touch the arc reactor. "If it ceases to function, will you not die?"

That also constitutes sexual harassment. Tony takes a quick step back, out of touchy-range. "Like I said. Willing to take the risk. You go back to the couch and I'll tell you when I've saved the world."

"I'm afraid I cannot stand by while you endanger yourself and race toward failure."

Tony was expecting him to say something like that. "I'm a grown-up, Thor. I've endangered myself before, and you can bet I'll make even more bad decisions in the future. I'm not too worried about this. The suit can handle a lot. Remember when you tried to Wrath of God me with the lightning?"

"The Tesseract-" Thor begins, but Tony cuts him off.

"I'll deal with it. I just need a couple minutes to put on the suit and I'm out of here. Besides, it makes more sense for me to go. I'm the one who knows where this place is. I'm the one who'll know where to look once I get there. You're the one who's better at controlling Loki, so you should stand guard. In case you haven't noticed, Iron Man's debonair alter-ego, Tony Stark, does not have any superpowers that are relevant to the task of babysitting an Asgardian psycho god. Tony Stark is better at wearing armor and visiting scientific research facilities. In fact, you could say those things are my top two skills. You make me stay here with Loki and he'll probably tear my head off, which would be a permanent waste of my talents."

"Loki would not do that. I assure you-"

"My head. Off. He will grab me by the ears and pull until my head is no longer attached to my body. I'm convinced of this. He looked like he was in a decapitation mood when you hauled him away earlier. I'd rather not be part of that."

"He will not harm you," Thor starts again. "I promise you this. You saved his life, Tony Stark, and by his honor he is now bound to you until that debt is repaid."

"Honor. Right." Now there's a word that's certainly applicable to Loki. "That makes me feel a lot better."

"And he likes you."

Tony's running his hand through his hair when Thor says that. It freezes about three-quarters of the way back. "...Wha...?"

"He likes you," Thor repeats with an encouraging smile that seems to say, now the two of you can be splendid friends!

"Do you do this often?" Tony asks. He has to shake his head as he does; the conversation is getting too absurd. "Try to find friends and set up play dates for your little brother? Because it's not going to work. Historically, the only people who like me are entourage bimbos and guys trying to run a scam. If I had to put Loki into either of those categories, it wouldn't be the one that's at
least fun to have around for a couple hours, and, since I don’t want to be scammed... No. I’m going. You're staying.”

“But-

“No. Final answer. My planet, my country, my decision. You did a great job as the Brute Squad springing Loki from jail, but now it’s my time to get down to business. So.” He jabs Thor in the middle of the chest, hard. “Go back to the couch, puddin’ pop.”

Looking halfway between insulted and enraged, Thor narrows his eyes and bares his teeth in a wolf-like warning. "Tony Stark...

"Sorry, pal. Can't always get what you want."

The animal sneer lasts a couple seconds longer before fading into a slightly less vicious frown. Just slightly. "Fine," he growls, elongating the word and finishing it off with a hissing breath. "But wait a moment. There is something I must tell you before you leave."

"Make it quick." As long as it helps him to shut up and let Tony get to work, Thor can say whatever he wants.

"The cycle of Loki's magic lasts nine days. With each passing day, his powers grow stronger, but also more unpredictable and difficult to control. And Loki himself becomes more irrational as the power builds."

"Right, because he's usually so level-headed," says Tony. "What does any of this have to do with the price of tea in China?"

"It is a warning. For your safety."

"You think he'll try to voodoo me once he realizes what I'm doing? Or warn his henchmen?"

A little flicker of something crosses Thor's face. An... apology? "No."

Tony sees it coming too late. Thor holds out his hand and in the blink of an eye, his hammer comes flying down the hallway. It's followed closely by a howling Loki, who's still attached to the handle and being dragged on his ass. The second the hammer's in Thor's hand, the chain falls free. The second after that, Thor's moving the shackle from Loki's ankle to his wrist."

"What the hell are you--" Tony begins, but he doesn't have time to finish. Thor's hand is on Tony's wrist next. Thor's hand and...

For a long and terrible moment, all he and Loki can do is stare at each other. Stare at the gleaming, rope-like silver. Then, as if on cue, Tony jerks his arm back and Loki starts scrambling in the opposite direction across the hardwood like a dog on a leash. The chain's on there good and solid. And Loki wins the tug-of-war. Tony is hauled forward to fall sprawling across the kitchen floor, landing hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

"Forgive me, Tony Stark," Thor says as Tony gasps for breath. "This was the only way. The power of the Tesseract is beyond you and everyone else in this realm. I must retrieve it myself."

"You... chained..." He coughs and tries to raise himself up on all fours, which would be a lot easier if Loki didn't keep backing away and pulling his arm out from under him.

"Again, forgive me. But I need Mjölnir for this task, and Loki must remain bound. You are the
next most secure thing in this house."

Next most secure thing? He'd punch Thor for that, if only he could stand up.

"I will return as soon as I can."

Then he's out and away, leaving Tony shackled to a genuine raving loony by way of a mere six feet of enchanted chain. Tony lifts his head again. For once Loki stops backing up, and Tony's able to sit. Loki's staring at him with an expression of horrified disbelief that holds a sharp edge of menace. He stares right back.

Thor said Loki liked him. Looks like that theory's about to be tested. For the sake of his continued existence, Tony sure hopes it's true. Even if it's only in some small, partial way that will keep Loki from utterly (and probably painfully) destroying him.

"How about this," he says, holding up his hands to ask for a truce. "We're the team now. You and me. Your stupid shit-dick brother's kicked out. And the minute he gets back, we both work together to murder him. Deal?"

ooo

It takes Loki all of four seconds to realize his superior Asgardian strength makes him leader of the chain gang. Since Tony is nowhere near as immovable as Thor's hammer, all Loki has to do is tug on the chain and Tony goes stumbling after. Tony, meanwhile, can throw all his weight into hauling on that thing and Loki won't budge an inch. Loki is apparently also made of dark matter.

That's why they spend the afternoon doing whatever Loki decides. If Loki wants to sit on the couch and watch TV, Tony also sits on the couch and watches TV. If Loki wants to pace in circles around the kitchen, Tony paces right along with him. If Loki takes a piss, Tony tries to ignore Loki taking a piss. And if Loki says he wants to have a shower... Tony sits on the edge of the tub with his head in his hands, wondering what he ever did wrong in a previous life to deserve this.

"I know you're only doing this to be a dick," he says, loud enough to be heard over the pounding spray of water. "Can I surrender now? You win. Whatever contest this is, you beat me. You are the boss. I bow down to your amazing powers of being a complete fuckstick." He pauses to see if Loki has anything to say, but no. There's just the splashing water and the gentle clink of the chain against the bathtub, punctuation to each of Loki's small movements. "Can we please drop this now and go back to sitting on the couch and ignoring each other until Thor gets back?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Loki airily replies. "I need to take a shower."

"You showered this morning. I saw you. Your hair was wet."

"Yes, but then Thor dragged me down the corridor and I became covered in dirt."

"The dirt in that hall is negligible."

"I am a god, Tony Stark. I have far higher standards of cleanliness than you. Do you mind if I use your girlfriend's shampoo?"

"Yes," Tony snaps. "Yes, I mind! I told you, use the guest shampoo. White bottle. I think I'd have to kill myself if you smelled like."

What he should have said instead, he realizes in that moment, is, 'Yes, Loki, you must use Pepper's shampoo. I insist. And don't you dare touch the stuff in the white bottle: that's for guests only.'
Why does he always think of these things too late? The familiar, sexy smell of coconut and mango is now wafting through the bathroom.

"I like this scent," says Loki.

"So did I," Tony mutters into his hands. Unfortunately, it'll now forever be associated with this moment. It's been ruined by the God of Assholes.

Loki takes his sweet time in the shower, using Pepper's conditioner and body wash along with her shampoo. By the time he finally asks for a towel, Tony's clothes are sticky and clingy from steam and sweat because the bathroom has turned into a goddamn sauna. "Thanks," Loki says, grabbing the towel as he steps out of the shower. He gives himself the barest and most perfunctory drying-off before chucking the towel aside and dragging Tony over to the mirror. He magics the fog off the glass somehow (okay, even Tony has to admit that's kind of impressive), then stands there humming to himself while he screws around with his hair (not impressive at all).

Is he doing this because he cares about how he looks? No. He spent all of yesterday with a hairdo like a whorled guinea pig, so he can't care that much. Is he doing this to piss off Tony Stark, who has to stand there and wait while he preens in his birthday suit? That sounds more like it.

Can two play at this game? As a matter of fact... they can. Loki obviously wants an audience for his shenanigans. Okay. He just got one.

Casually, Tony moves over to sit on the edge of the countertop. He slides right up to Loki, so close their legs are almost touching, and locks his eyes on Loki's face. Loki tries to ignore him for a moment. And a moment longer, carefully pushing back a strand of hair. Then his resolve cracks like cheap plastic and he looks at Tony with one eyebrow raised in a question that doesn't need to be asked out loud. "Um..."

Tony holds his gaze just long enough to make a point before slowly, purposefully, and very obviously sliding his eyes on down for a better view.

For the first time in what might just be the history of ever, Loki looks like he's been taken by surprise. He blinks and hitches his breath, opening and closing his gaping mouth like a goldfish. Only for a second, though. He manages to clamp down that mask of composure and twist his shock into a sneer quick enough. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Not really," Tony answers. "But since you insist on putting that offer on the table, I figure I might as well check out the goods before I turn you down and break your heart."

"I... you what?"

Tony can't help but grin; it's nice to have Loki on the uncomfortable, speechless end of the spectrum for once. "I'm just saying thanks-but-no-thanks. Good try, though. Maybe if we were in college, and really drunk... you never know. Or if you were a chick. If you were a chick, I'd hit that. For sure. More than once."

One of Loki's eyebrows rises. Then the other, though the rest of his face remains carefully neutral. Stone cold and thin-lipped. A thought flashes through Tony's mind, along with a trickle of apprehension: did he go too far? Did he poke the bear too hard? Is Loki, a guy who probably doesn't take well to being on the receiving end of a joke, going to make good on one of yesterday's promises to turn him into a spider or something equally nasty?

No: Loki just cocks his head to the side like he's feigning interest in Tony's antics. "Is that so,
Tony Stark?"

"Yep," he hears his mouth say before he can stop it.

"You would be so presumptuous as to attempt to bed me, were I a woman?"

"Damn straight. You'd make a hot girl."

He should probably slap himself for that. What the fuck is wrong with him? It's like being this close to Loki makes him absorb the God of Assholes vibe. It brings out the worst of his dipshit jerk side and he loses all semblance of a verbal filter in favor of being a raging tool. That comment had to have gone too far. His whole body tenses, preparing for the inevitable flying fist and a broken nose. Or broken whole face.

But again, no. Instead of taking offense or even looking annoyed, Loki just smiles. He finds this amusing. "I shall keep that in mind."

"So will I, if you know what I mean," says Tony's mouth, while his brain shouts, Jesus Christ you nutsack, shut your pie hole and stop talking before you say something even worse! "Sorry," he immediately adds. "That was... I'm just being a dick now, aren't I? Not that you don't deserve a dick, but... okay that came out wrong." Really wrong. Fuck fuck fuck. "Can we please go watch some exploding cars on TV now?" I need a drink.

"Yes," Loki agrees. And his shoulders are shaking with barely suppressed, silent laughter. He finds this really amusing. Awesome.

Tony holds out his hand. "Truce, bro?" The sooner Loki lets them leave the bathroom, the sooner he can get a drink, and put this whole scene behind him, and have another drink, and forget about it forever. Loki, for once smiling in a way that doesn't make him look like a serial killer, returns the gesture.

Unfortunately, Tony forgot one little detail. One vital detail.

Do not let him touch you.

The electric current flies through Tony's body, radiating up his arm and through his shoulder, down to his stomach and filling his legs. It's stronger than it was the previous night. It pulses and hums, flooding every cell and setting his blood on fire, standing each hair on end with a tingling shudder that ripples over his skin. And it's not a bad feeling. Nope. Not at all. In fact, Loki's magic feels a lot like... the sensation of watching porn made physical. It shoots right to his groin and stays there.

"Uhhnnn," he manages to say. What the hell kind of word is that? He tries to pull his hand back, but his slackening muscles put up a meager effort and it's not enough to break ol' pit bull grip.

Loki frowns. "What?"

"Your... uh... I..." It's no use trying to speak; the porn-touch sees to that, filling up all available space between his thoughts and his tongue, muddling everything.

"My what?" Loki asks. "Tony Stark, are you about to be ill? Because if you vomit on me..." He lifts his other hand to Tony's arm as a steadying brace

That, naturally, is about as effective as trying to extinguish a fire with gasoline. A second dose of crackling sex-magic leaps from Loki's hand to Tony's skin, overwhelming every last nerve in his
body and turning his bones to jelly. This is too much. It's all compounding and concentrating in the most inconvenient place, playing up and down his hips and thighs like the caress of a teasing ghost. *Shit.* His knees buckle. His stupid, treacherous body is too preoccupied to do anything more than let itself fall.

At least he doesn't fall into Loki, though it's a pretty sad state of affairs when he can consider collapsing to the bathroom floor to be the upside of a situation. The downside is that now Loki looks almost concerned, kneeling at his side, and *keeps touching him.* All over. A squeeze on the arm. The press of fingertips against his forehead. A hand cupping his chin. Each little snippet of contact sets him alight. Each one sends a white-hot bolt of desire straight down to where it counts.

"Tony Stark?"

If Tony pours all concentration into his speech, he can just manage to hiss something halfway intelligible. "Pleasssssssse... sssstop..."

"Stop? What do you mean? Stop what?"

It takes a lot of effort to pry Loki's hand off his arm. Not just because of Loki's strength, but because (and, oh holy hell, it hurts like a bitch even to admit this secretly to himself) there's a base, slimy, dark, dirty place deep inside that's maybe kind of enjoying this feeling. Okay, more than 'kind of'. And that base, slimy, dark, dirty place would rather lean into the touch than force it away.

"Stop touching you?" Loki guesses. "Why? I suppose it makes you uncomfortable?" As if to make a point, he presses one deliberate finger onto Tony's chest just above the arc reactor.

Tony can't help it. His back arches up off the floor and an undignified, borderline obscene moan escapes his lips. That porn-touch is way too effective. He can feel himself growing hard, and when Loki leans over... *Oh please, Rational Brain, he prays, don't let Frat Boy Brain do anything that will make me want to drown myself in bleach tomorrow...*

"Ohhhhhhh," Loki murmurs as he trails his finger down Tony's chest. By the time he reaches the belt buckle, he looks uncannily like a childhood nightmare clown about to burst from pure mischievous glee. "I see now. How interesting!" He taps his fingertips against Tony's belt, punctuating each syllable as he speaks: "How ve-ry in-te-res-ting! I never even considered it might affect you in this way. But I should have guessed, shouldn't I?"

Loki pulls both his hands away and rocks back to sit on his heels, still grinning like the Cheshire Cat. With contact broken, the magic running rampant through Tony's body subsides. It doesn't disappear completely, but it does fade to a more manageable level. A warm tingle of desire lolling inside him. Tony's able to lift his head and prop himself up on his elbows.

"Uh," he begins. There are a hundred things he wants to say, questions to ask and threats to shout, but his sex-hazy mind can't find the right words for any of them. He has to settle for, "What?"

"This," says Loki, prodding Tony's arm and releasing another wave of intoxicating porn-magic. "The energy has quite the effect on you. Everyone responds to it differently, usually in a very dull way, but this..." Trailing his hand down Tony's thigh, he laughs softly to himself. "I quite enjoy this."

"I don't," Tony growls.

Smirking, Loki glances at Tony's jeans. "Your body language might suggest otherwise."
"Don't listen. My body makes a lot of bad choices."

"Is that so?" He pauses to trace the line of Tony's thigh back up, hand lingering at the hip. "What manner of bad choices? Do tell."

Tony lets himself fall back to the floor. There's not much else he can do with Loki's hand sitting where it is, radiating dangerous electricity. It's more or less impossible to concentrate on keeping his head up while simultaneously concentrating on not squirming into Loki's touch like a shameless hussy. *Fuck you*, he tries to say. *Fuck you and your horrible magic!* All that comes out is a hoarse grunt: "Magic..."

Regardless, Loki still gets the gist of what he means. "*Inert* magic. Nothing more than accumulated energy, transferred between us, which manifests in you as what I can only guess to be... extreme sexual desire? This is none of my doing."

But it is, and the way he's smirking, he knows it full well. His grip on Tony's thigh tightens, squeezing, before he slides his hand upwards. Under the hem of Tony's shirt. Grazing bare skin. Tony clenches his teeth and tries not to whimper (doesn't work) as Loki's hand splays across his ribs.

"Oh, Tony Stark," Loki purrs. "We will have such a wonderful time tonight!"

Well. This definitely constitutes sexual harassment. And Tony can't do a single thing about it as Loki lies down on the bath mat to cuddle up next to him, head resting on his shoulder. Except maybe think to himself, not for the first time, how much he hates his life.
Chapter Summary

Loki ropes Tony into some mandatory cuddling for totally legitimate healing purposes, and it quickly devolves into exactly what Tony wanted to avoid. Thor proves himself unable to steal lunch money... no wait, a valuable artifact from a bunch of nerds, and everybody makes a new plan to storm the castle.

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you so much to everyone who's been following this story. I'm so incredibly grateful for your comments and for all of you taking your time to let me know what you think. :)

Quick heads up: I've changed the rating of this story to 'Explicit' because of reasons. Reasons that happen in this chapter, which has been kind of like pulling teeth to write. I've actually rewritten the first half of it four times, and I'm making myself stop and post it now because I have this feeling I'm making it worse by constantly fiddling and rearranging shit. For better or worse, at least it's done.

Tony is fuzzy on the details of how they ended up back on the couch, but he has a bad feeling it's only because Loki was being merciful and decided not to full-out molest him on the bathroom floor. Maybe Loki got bored with his despicable behavior, or maybe he's an old-school romantic with grandiose notions of a first time involving candles and roses and 70s soft rock. Or maybe he's plotting out something worse. (That's probably it.) Whatever happened, Tony's still, thankfully, dressed. All clothes intact and in place. And for once Loki's wearing some pants, too. No shirt, but pants are good. Better than good. Great. Even if they're women's turquoise yoga capris.

"Don't even think about it," Tony growls as Loki shifts position on the couch beside him. "You try to cuddle with me, you even try to touch me, and I swear I will strangle you until your head pops off."

"I think we both know you lack the requisite strength for such theatrics," Loki sneers.

That works. Loki raises a hand to the back of his head, covering his tangled curls. He doesn't say anything, but he does scootch over to put a couple extra inches between them.

There's nothing good on TV, which is probably par for the course at eight pm on a Friday. It's like the networks assume everyone has a real life and nobody's stuck at home in Atlantic City, chained to a scheming, degenerate space god while flipping through channels in search of anything better than a rerun marathon of Pawn Stars. He needs to get Netflix in this place.

"When will Thor return?" Loki asks.
Tony yawns. "Why? You bored as I am and want a fight?"

"Yes, but that is not why I ask."

"Need more cuddling with your big brother?"

Loki doesn't answer. Tony assumes that means 'yes'. Also maybe 'fuck you for mocking me'.

Truth is, though, Thor's been gone too long, and it's something Tony's begun to worry about. The research facility isn't far. Maybe a half-hour flight, tops. Even factoring in Thor being unable to read the map and getting lost a couple times, it shouldn't have taken more than four hours to find the place, locate the Tesseract, and haul ass back home. So either he got really lost or... something else happened.

"You don't have any Jedi mind powers, do you?" he asks Loki. "Like being able to talk to Thor telepathically?"

"I do," Loki replies. "But as Thor lacks the ability to reply, it would be useless."

"But you could send him a message to come back now."

Loki nods. "I could."

"Aaaaand... you won't because?" Tony prompts.

"He's out of sight range. It would require too much magic, which, at this point in time, I am not willing to expend."

"Right, because you've expended your magic on such noble pursuits so far, like vanishing fog from the bathroom mirror." And other things that will never be mentioned again.

Once again, Loki can't seem to be bothered to answer. He just tucks his legs up so he can wrap his arms around his shins and rest his forehead on his knees. He looks pretty bad again, now that Tony takes the time to make an assessment. Maybe even worse that before. In the dim light radiating from the TV, he's white as a ghost with a sickly, clammy sheen on his skin. With every breath he inhales, he shudders.

"You look like shit," says Tony. "Guess that means you really do need cuddles, don't you?"

Unfortunately, that turns out to be the wrong thing to say. Loki decides to take it as an invitation, unfolding from his curled-up position to make a move towards Tony.

Quickly, Tony scrambles back and holds out his hand in front of himself as a barrier. "Hey hey hey! I didn't mean with me!"

"I'm sorry, Tony Stark. Please believe me when I say that you are certainly not my first choice, but alas I have nothing in the way of alternatives at the moment. As you so elegantly mentioned, I 'look like shit'. I happen to be feeling rather the same way."

"No. And I mean hell no. After what you pulled in the bathroom, if you think I'm ever letting you in my personal space-"

"After what I did?" Loki interrupts. "You tried to drown me in the shower! I have far more reason to be mistrustful of you!"

Tried to... what? "What are you talking about? You sex-magicked me into a stupor and then I
woke up on the couch! Nothing else happened!"

"No," Loki growls, rising up onto his knees and clenching his fists at his sides. "After we kissed, you went berserk. First you threatened to tear my skin off, but then changed your mind and shouted I was destined to be your slave forever with the instruction to, and I quote, 'suck my dick you dirty whore'. Which, I must say, I found highly distasteful. Though you quickly changed your mind again and turned on the shower in a pathetic attempt to drown me. Then you lost consciousness and I dragged you back here."

Tony can feel something hot like shame creeping up his throat. Or maybe it's just bile. "We... we... kissed?"

In answer, Loki stares at him with a disbelieving I'm-going-to-slap-you expression. "Of everything I just said, that is what you heard?!"

No, he heard a lot more, but that's the most disturbing. He kissed Loki. In the bathroom. On the bath mat. Next to the toilet. He kissed Loki. And what's worse than the mental image that thought conjures is the cloudy memory floating through the back of his mind that Loki was actually a really good kisser. "Oh, cripes..." he groans, dropping his head back and running his hands over his face.

"We're going to cuddle now," says Loki, and Tony's pretty sure he's never heard the word 'cuddle' uttered in such a vicious and threatening tone.

"No, we're not."

Loki's hand shoots forward, stopping just a fraction of an inch from grabbing Tony's throat in a claw-like grip. "Yes, we are. You can agree nicely, or I can crush your spine and paralyze you from the neck down, thereby rendering you immobile and incapable of refusal. Which would you prefer?"

Well, when phrased that way, how can a guy say no? "I see," Tony says, edging away from Loki's grasp as best he can. "I guess that's a reasonable choice for you to offer me and not at all like something out of a Saw movie. Um. Can I at least get drunk first?"

The words of refusal almost visibly dangle from the tip of Loki's tongue as he scowls.

"I can guarantee I'll be way better at cuddling once I have a minimum of seven drinks in my system."

With a roll of the eyes, Loki relents and nods. "I suppose."

The walk to the kitchen might as well be an execution march, and Tony's choosing his preferred method of destruction from the liquor cabinet. He's never been a big fan of vodka, but this feels like a Russian Standard kind of night. A cheap, quick drunk is appealing.

"You want anything?" he asks Loki. Please say yes. Please get drunk and pass out before this gets any more out of hand than it already is.

Loki scrutinizes the array of bottles on the shelf, but ultimately shakes his head in disinterest. Then it's back to the couch.

This feels even more like an execution march.

"Just gimme a sec," Tony says when Loki, who appears to be in an all-business mood, tries to...
shove him down into his seat. He unscrews the bottle and throws back a series of good mouthfuls. Enough to bring on a starter buzz. If he's lucky, the booze will kick in fast. And he's destined for a bit of luck, the way things have been going, right?

"Okay," he says as he sits. "Let's get this over with. But just so we're clear, all I'm doing is sitting here. Everything else is up to you. You cuddle and do your weird magic, I watch TV and think about how much I hate you. Nothing more."

The snort Loki gives in reply must mean he agrees. He sits down at Tony's side and Tony braces himself for the impending blast of porn-touch-magic, which... doesn't exactly arrive as expected?

It's there (oh, it's there, and Tony won't pretend he doesn't feel it), but it's nowhere near as strong as it was in the bathroom. It doesn't jolt through his bones like a head-on collision with an electrical storm. It doesn't leech away all his strength or turn his brain into mush. It just slides smoothly through his skin, caressing his nerves and saturating every last inch of his body. Maybe Loki's holding back, or maybe Tony's working up a tolerance. Who knows. But this time, it's a good feeling. Not overwhelming. Not all-consuming, not mind-frying. Nice. Calming. Content.

It goes well with the vodka.

He takes another couple swigs, enjoying the way the drink burns down his throat before slowly spiraling up again to wrap around his brain. It's starting to kick in as the minutes tick by, and it takes the grating edge off everything. Life feels so much smoother with alcohol greasing the way. Easier to slide over all the bumps and inconsistencies. Easier to face whatever the world dishes up. Easier to convince himself he's having a good time. And really, it could be worse. Loki's finally quiet, tucked up like an innocent little snuggle-pet under his arm, and any time Loki's neither talking nor moving is A-OK in Tony's books. So maybe this won't be such a crappy night after all. He's got one hand on a bottle and the other resting on the shoulder of a lithe body with long, careless black curls and china-doll skin in the flickering blue TV twilight. No, not so bad. Not bad at all.

Maybe it's the booze. Maybe it's the frustration of the day finally starting to uncoil. Maybe it's the warmth of Loki's skin pressing up against his, or the way Loki's hand possessively rests on his chest. Maybe it's the smell of coconut lingering in Loki's hair. Maybe it's Tony's rational brain finally burning out and giving up, handing the reins over to the part of his brain that just says, 'Hey, why the hell not?' Or maybe it's the porn-magic drenching his mind with its relentless suggestions. (It's probably mostly the porn-magic.) Whatever it is, Tony finds himself setting the bottle aside and lifting his hand to cup Loki's chin in a gesture that seems way too sure of itself.

Loki knows what's coming; he follows Tony's minimal direction and tilts his face up. He's not grinning like an asshole now. There's no smirk, no triumphant I-told-you-so. Just eyes dark and smoldering with desire, and soft lips already parted. Ready.

The kiss is gentle at first, hardly more than a brush of contact. The barest touch and mingling breath. Once. Twice. The soft curve of Loki's lower lip skimming against Tony's. Testing. Then a sharp inhalation of breath as Loki strains forward, searching for something further. His tongue skirting the shape of Tony's mouth. "Tony Stark..." he whispers.

And that's enough to send everything crashing over the edge. No more time for gentleness. Tony's hand slides around to the back of Loki's head, grabbing a fistful of his hair and dragging him closer into a kiss that's bruising and harsh. His tongue finds its way between Loki's lips and past the barrier of his teeth. Learning him. Tasting him. Claiming him. And Loki... Loki's going right along with it, wrapping his arms around Tony's neck and pushing nearer with a feral little growl, the bare skin of his chest pressing hard against Tony's shirt.
It should be weird, says the part of Tony’s brain that can still think. Every law of reason and logic tells him kissing Loki should feel wrong, but no. It’s hot as hell and he wants more. Needs more. Needs to be closer. Needs Loki’s body up against his, grasping and clinging. Needs his shirt off. Needs Loki sliding down between his knees, parting his thighs in a dangerous way, hands on his fly. Needs Loki to quit screwing around and get his belt undone already. It’s a stupid belt. Why did he choose such a stupid belt with such a stupid, complicated buckle?

"Let me," he rasps against Loki’s cheek, at which Loki nods and pulls back just enough to let Tony’s hand reach down. He fights with the buckle for far too long, fingers clumsy and shaking, until the damn thing’s undone and he can whip his belt off and throw it aside. Then Loki takes over to unzip his pants and slide deft fingers past the waistband of his shorts and... Oh god.

He's half-hard already. Loki’s magic porn touch brings him the rest of the way there, and all hope for salvaging any scrap of dignity is lost as he jerks into Loki’s grip like a mindless animal. Needs that touch. Friction. Now. He lets his head fall back as his mind shuts down, giving over to the wicked pleasure of Loki’s hand and the way those skilled fingers stroke him. Envelop his shaft. Circle the head with the pad of a thumb and explore every inch of electrified skin. Savagely push him all the way to the brink before slowing down into a taunting, maddening rhythm. Just enough to keep him struggling towards completion. Not enough to take him there.

"What do you want, Tony Stark?"

The hoarse words dance in his ear but can manage no better than a desperate moan in reply.

"Hand? Mouth? What do you desire? Tell me."

"Yessss," he hisses. Yes, he wants that. All of that.

Loki laughs softly before tracing the curve of Tony's ear with the point of his tongue. One little touch, but the feeling of it reverberates down Tony's spine with a shiver. He arches along with it to rise up into Loki's embrace.

"Yes," Loki echoes back to him.

"Yes," he repeats.

Loki's lips trail down Tony's neck, breath warm and soft and very real, caressing his skin in a descending path. To his collarbone. Down the side of his chest. Subtle kisses falling to his hip, preceded by light fingertips. His muscles tense in anticipation, exposed body tingling with desire. Just a little farther and... Tony bites his lip and sucks in a heavy breath through his teeth as Loki's mouth reaches the base of his cock and that curtain of black hair tickles against his inner thigh.

Pushing his hair back from his face, Loki glances up and wets his lips with the point of his tongue. His crystalline eyes gleam cold blue and if looks were enough to finish a man, Tony would come right then and there.

He nearly does when that tongue slips out to circle around the head of his cock and probe at the slit and the sensitive skin of the underside with fluttering little licks. Slowly, infuriatingly slowly, Loki bobs down to let his tongue continue its trail along Tony’s shaft, skimming the length from root to tip. One hand follows, repeating the gesture with a tight grip, while the other blazes a line of electricity down his thigh before slipping up to cup and tug at his balls. Tony swallows hard to quell the artless groan rapidly building inside him. Taut with need, he pushes up, striving for more, silently begging.
That might be a depraved grin flickering for a fraction of a second on Loki’s face before he slides down to swallow Tony whole and the magic surges with explosive new strength. Tony’s hips jerk forward; there’s no way to stop himself as building pleasure swells up through his body. His hands reflexively reach out to hold the back of Loki’s head, urging and guiding, but the gesture isn’t necessary. Loki knows exactly what he’s doing and exactly when to do it to fuel the need raging in Tony’s core. His fingers, his lips, and (*oh sweet goddamn*) those little muscles in the back of his throat… Loki’s mouth is slick and ready, working in earnest now. Tongue firm and teasing on the head while his hand strokes in a building rhythm.

*Just a little… more…*

It won’t last much longer. Tony *can’t* last much longer. He’s hovering at the line, straining into Loki’s touch. Into the wet heat of Loki’s mouth. Into Loki’s intoxicating magic. (*Oh, so close!*) It’s singing through his body, pulling him up to the peak, prickling fire across his skin as Loki’s hot tongue glides up the length of his cock and then pulls back for one unbearable moment before taking him in again. All the way. Harder and faster. Sucking, squeezing, licking, stroking in a frenzied sprint to the finish.

And then release slams into him like a punch to the gut, and he’s clenching his teeth so hard his jaw shakes with strain, body rigid as every muscle tightens, twisting his fingers in Loki’s hair…

Loki takes it all. Every last, shuddering speck, until the fever subsides and Tony sinks back into the couch, breathless and drained. Slowly, Loki pulls away to rest his cheek against Tony’s bare leg and smile in that enigmatic way of his.

Tony has to close his eyes. He lets his head drop to the side. He pulls in one deep breath after another, trying to slow his heart and clear his mind despite the remnants of pleasure still rolling through him. But this afterglow isn’t all that rosy. More of a tarnished gray. With a groan, he lifts his hands to his face and pushes sweat-slick hair back from his forehead. His head hurts. It’s starting to spin, turning his thoughts fuzzy and confused.

Maybe Loki’s magic doesn’t go so well with the vodka after all. He opens his eyes. Loki might be the one kneeling there on the floor with an open mouth, but suddenly Tony’s the one feeling powerless and vulnerable and… used.

“Uh,” he says to break the silence, and the sound catches thick in his throat. The rest of the words come no more easily. He has to dig for them through the sluggish fog in his brain. “Yesterday you… you said... you need physical contact to... balance your power. I guess by that you really meant…?”

The nod Loki gives him in reply is almost imperceptible. Just a little shift of the head, which Tony feels against his skin more than he sees.

“Right,” Tony whispers.

The languid grace of a predatory animal ripples across Loki’s body as he rises to his feet. “Any physical contact helps.” His own voice is low and soft. “As much as a single bite of bread might alleviate hunger. But to be truly sated, when the magic has gone this far…” He sink down onto the couch, straddling Tony’s legs and taking Tony’s hands in his own to guide them, gently, to the waistband of those ridiculous yoga pants. “You see why I have need of you. And I do thank you for your cooperation.”

Those words are barely audible, murmured as Loki shifts forward to press the rock-hard shaft of his arousal against Tony’s hip. With a little hiss of uncertainty Tony pulls back, struggling to keep
the safety of distance between them, but then Loki’s hands are on his shoulders, one sliding around his neck while the other dips down his back, and Loki’s lips graze over his cheek, warm breath catching in his ear, and... Somehow his thumbs are hooked in Loki’s waistband. Shakily pulling the fabric down. Looking, through Tony’s eyes, like somebody else’s hands, and somebody else’s actions.

The first warning, he doesn’t hear.

But Loki does. Loki freezes where he is, mouth seeking the hollow below Tony’s jaw, then in an instant he’s up and perched up like a groundhog with his eyes scanning towards the front door.

Tony hears the second warning.

“Brother? Tony Stark?”

Lightning couldn’t move faster than Loki: it takes him only one perfectly choreographed second to roll aside, snatch the throw blanket from the armrest, and curl up on the far end of the couch, pretending to be asleep. Leaving Tony with his pants around his ankles, his belt tossed aside, and his shirt... Yeah, God knows where his shirt went, and he can only hope (with his slowed and booze-soaked mind) that Loki didn’t toss it somewhere that Thor will see. He reaches down to grab his pants, but his fingers feel like they’re floating through molasses and something’s bunched up with his boxers. Too drunk to see what or how as Thor’s footsteps get louder and closer. “Shit...”

A grunt of disgust rises from the other end of the couch, and Loki tosses the blanket at him. He has just enough time to cover himself before Thor rounds the corner. For the first time since this whole misadventure began, he’s actually thankful for the Asgardian habit of sitting around the house half-dressed, if only because Thor will find nothing strange about him sprawled on the couch, shirtless, with only a throw blanket tucked around his waist.

And he’s right. Thor doesn’t give him a second glance. “Tony Stark. Is Loki asleep?”

“Think so,” Tony lies. Loki pretending to be asleep is about the same thing, and all Thor needs to know.

A yawn and a sigh do a good job of exposing just how beaten down and weary Thor really is as he makes his way around to the front of the couch. Tony knows he should be shocked at the sight. Somehow, he isn’t, like this sort of shit has become commonplace. Thor looks like hell, to put it politely. He’s cradling his right arm in his left and favoring his right leg, and every inch of him is covered in filth. Mostly dust or soot, a bit of mud, and a red scrape of blood across his face that ends in matted hair below his ear. And then something Tony can’t even identify, an iridescent purple oilslick ooze, spattered all across the front of his armor. On top of that is the smell. Sweat, singed hair, and the sickly odor of gore.

He sets his hammer down near Loki’s feet, but doesn’t touch the chain just yet. He looks apprehensive. Like it’s safer, maybe, to leave Tony shackled for now? At least until he spits out whatever stupid thing it’s taking him so long to say. “Tony Stark...” he begins.

“Let’s just not,” Tony interrupts before he can go any further. “We can talk tomorrow. Not now. Not... yeah, no. ‘Cause I’m kinda drunk and you look and smell like a warzone. We’d fuck up our team meeting like this. So call it a night?”

“Agreed,” says Thor, letting his head drop with a grateful nod. “We will discuss this tomorrow.”
Tony nods, repeating, “Tomorrow.” And there will be a lot to discuss tomorrow. Because despite Tony’s hazy mind and despite all the distraction of blood and guts and dirt of all kinds, one thing is glaringly obvious.

Thor doesn’t have the Tesseract.

ooo

It's going to be a grumpy day. Tony gets out of bed, showers, shaves, and shuffles into the kitchen with all the good cheer of a bear fresh out of hibernation. At this point, it's hard to tell who he hates more: Loki or himself. Maybe both equally. Loki for being Loki, and himself for drunkenly enabling Loki being Loki. And if Thor hadn’t interrupted when he did... Yeah, that’s not even worth thinking about. None of this bullshit is worth thinking about. Easier to just be indiscriminately pissed off without delving into too much detail.

Loki and Thor are already sitting at the kitchen island when Tony walks in. It may be his imagination brought on by the foul mood, but the two of them look extra-cuddly this morning. Their stools are all snugged up close together, and each has one arm around the other. Assholes. They look way too content, sitting there like everything's puppies and rainbows as they eat their toaster waffles.

"Good morning, Tony Stark," says Thor.

Tony grunts something along the lines of 'mrrrr' in return. He drains the last half-cup out of the coffee pot (great), and pours a big bowl of cereal only to find out there's no milk left (even better). Screw that. He fills up the rest of his mug with some cheap rye and grabs a bag of beef jerky from the cupboard before sitting down across from the Asgardians. Thor looks like he might be about to question whether or not this is a valid Earth breakfast, but in the end keeps his trap shut. As for Loki, Tony had been hoping he'd have the decency to avoid eye contact or look embarrassed or something, but no. Loki stares. Maybe smiles just the tiniest bit. And slowly licks his lips.

"Fuckwad," Tony pointedly turns away from him and concentrates instead on the one he can stand to look at.

"So. Thor." As far as Tony's concerned, there's no need for small talk. It's time to get down to business and sort out some of this mess. "What the hell happened yesterday? And FYI, you better have a damn good reason for coming back empty-handed, because if you feed me some bullshit when I'm already wishing I'd gone in your place to do things right, I will fuck you up in every way I know how."

"With scissors?" scoffs Loki.

"Can it, Harry Potter," Tony snaps. "I've had enough of your special kind of crazy to last five lifetimes. You shut up and eat your waffle or you're next in line to get your ass handed to you."

Thor's eyes and lips narrow into slits, and he leans forward like he's some kind of shaggy blond jungle animal trying to make himself look bigger. "Do you threaten us, Tony Stark?"

"Yep," says Tony. "I damn well threaten. And you know why?" He glances from one Asgardian to the next: Thor's snarl and Loki's bemused smirk. "I'm not afraid of you dicksmacks any more. Yeah. You heard that. And I admit it: I was kind of iffy around you two at first, all-powerful alien overlords. But you know what? Now I know better." He points an accusing finger at Thor. "You're a fuck-up. You failed at stealing a small cube from a bunch of physics nerds, and worse than that, you can't even get the concept of wearing pants through your thick skull! I bet you're
wearing a towel right now. Am I right?"

That surreptitious little glance downward is enough to tell Tony his guess hit the mark.

"And you!" Tony rounds on Loki. "You had endless chances to kill me yesterday, or cut off my hand to slip the chain, or even grab me by the neck and run out the door. But did you do any of that? No! Instead of acting like a legitimate psycho supervillain and escaping, all day you amounted to nothing more than an inconvenient sex-pest!"

Thor looks over at Loki. "You did what?"

"Are you finished?" asks Loki, conveniently ignoring Thor.

"No!" Tony takes an angry bite of beef jerky and chews, which takes longer than anticipated. He really shouldn't've stuck with cereal. By the time he swallows, the moment is gone. "Fine. Yes. I'm done." One minute of angry outburst per day is probably enough. He tosses back his coffee and rye, then pours another. Just rye this time. "Okay." Trying again. Calmer. "Thor. Please be a good pal and tell me what happened yesterday. We need a new plan, since it's statistically improbable that the Tesseract will fall into our laps on its own. Tell me what happened and where it went wrong. Go."

Thor doesn't look thrilled, but at least he starts talking. "I found the building. I found Erik Selvig, and I found the Tesseract. Whatever device they were constructing to house it was complete, or nearly so. I shall omit the tedious details, but the man of S.H.I.E.L.D., Agent Barton, tried to fight me off. He was easily overcome. At this point, I believed I had everything well in hand."

He pauses to rub his forehead. "And then?" asks Tony.

"And then everything turned around very quickly. The moment I touched the Tesseract to take it from its casing... I do not know what happened, Tony Stark. It... came to life. As if it recognized the touch of my kind. Its energy flare filled the entire room, powerful enough to knock me off my feet. I jumped up immediately but the space hole had already opened."

Tony can feel the expression of unclouded WTF spreading across his face at Thor's words. "...Space hole?"

"Yes," confirms Thor. "A space hole. Not large, but enough to allow seven Chitauri warriors to pass through before it closed."

"Space hole," Tony repeats.

"A space hole is a hole in space," Thor helpfully explains. "It connects two points-"

"Yeah I got that part," says Tony. "I guess I just thought the technical name for it would be a little more... impressive." And less unintentionally lewd.

"No. On Asgard, we refer to this phenomenon as a space hole."

"It is how I came to be here," Loki adds. "Through the space hole."

"Please stop saying 'space hole'," says Tony. "Let's agree to call it an energy portal or something. So, back to the Chitauri coming through the energy portal?"

"'Energy portal' sounds awkward, but if you insist..." Thor shrugs before continuing. "The Chitauri themselves, like Agent Barton, proved easy to defeat. All seven are now dead. But the
concentrated energy released by the Tesseract damaged the building's structure. I was across the room finishing the last of the Chitauri when I saw Erik Selvig grab the cube and run. I tried to follow him, but the roof collapsed between us. By the time I pushed through the rubble he was gone. I spent the next several hours in search of him to no avail, eventually having to abandon hope and return here. You are right, Tony Stark." Pausing, he shakes his head in the shadow of defeat. "This failure is mine. I will take responsibility. And I will set it right."

"How?" Tony asks. It's one thing to talk about doing the right thing, but a whole other kettle of fish to actually do it. Especially when doing now involves tracking down a man on the run who was last seen on Long Island eighteen hours ago.

"Loki will help me."

He says it like he's so sure of himself. Loki, meanwhile, looks less than convinced. "I will?"

"No, Loki will not help you," says Tony. "Loki is a perverted sociopath who cannot be trusted."

Loki rolls his eyes at that, but, Tony notes, does not deny the allegation.

"Look, here's the thing," Tony continues. "The minute Selvig took the Tesseract out of the lab, it probably popped right up on Banner's scopes. I'm betting S.H.I.E.L.D. picked it up within an hour, so going forward? We have to run on the assumption that they got it first. But you know what... that might not be so bad. S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't exactly have a stellar record for getting shit and keeping it."

Slowly, Thor nods. "We can take it from them."

"Yeah. I mean..." He points a thumb over in Loki's direction. "We're pretty much sitting at a hundred percent success rate when it comes to stealing their stuff."

"Hilarious," mutters Loki.

"Then we should go now," says Thor. "We will return to their airship and take the Tesseract in the same manner we rescued Loki."

Tony nods, and suddenly he's starting to feel a little more optimistic about the day ahead. "Explosions and wrecking things. I like that. Nice plan, Thor. Finish breakfast, then we suit up?"

"Agreed."

Good. That sounds good, and Tony finds himself nodding again just to think about it. Truth is, after more than two full days without his armor, he's itching to get it back on and level the playing field between himself and Thing One and Thing Two. (Also, the chances of Loki's porn-touch working through metal are slim. He hopes.)

Then Loki has to throw in his two cents. "Why in the Nine Realms would you try to fight your way into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s stronghold? That's a terrible plan."

Well yes, but 'terrible' and 'viable' aren't always at odds in Tony's experience. "Let me guess: you have a better idea? Sneak in dressed like janitors? Put everyone to sleep with an enchanted whistle? Swap the cube out for a bag of sand?"

"No, I would blast them out of the sky. It's far easier to find the treasure in pile of rubble full of corpses than in a fortress full of armed guards."
For a long time Tony just stares at him, trying not to think too hard or in too much detail about what goes on inside that insane little head. "You disturb me. In many, many ways."

"Your lack of practicality disturbs me. Why risk your life fighting your way in when it would take far less time and effort to destroy their worthless machine and wait for everyone to die? The airship has four propellers. If the three of us each target one, it's finished. Once it crashes to the ground and the fires have burned out, the Tesseract will be easy to claim from the ashes."

"No. No crashing, no burning, and no death. Just... no."

"Fine," Loki sneers. "But at least allow me to suggest one slight improvement over your 'plan', such as it is. Before you and Thor burst in and clumsily destroy everything, I create a diversion to ensure the Tesseract is unguarded. That way, no-one dies and we can all feel good about ourselves and bask in the loving glow of our harmless thievery."

Tony glances over at Thor, who looks back at him with an expression that practically shouts out what they're both thinking: Is he serious? "Good try, bud," Tony says to Loki, "but I think you're forgetting that you're the prisoner. You stay here, chained to the water heater. You're not part of Super Team."

"That's not what you said yesterday when-"

"Everything I said yesterday is null and void," Tony quickly cuts over him. "Yesterday does not count. Yesterday never happened. Yesterday exists only in the Twilight Zone."

Like the dick he is, Loki smirks. "Yes, do continue to tell yourself that."

"You're still not part of the team."

"Wait, Tony Stark," says Thor. "Loki's suggestion could be valid. If he creates a diversion-"

"He's not part of the team!" Tony snaps, and he can feel his aggravation level slowly rising again. Not that it ever fell very far in the first place. "Look, there was nothing wrong with the original plan. Can we stick to that? We go, Loki stays here, and if he escapes... well, I don't really care right now. He can run wild through New Jersey and then die quietly in an alley after being mugged for his yoga pants."

"I'm not wearing-" Loki starts.

"I don't want to know what you're not wearing! Can you please shut up and let the men get back to planning their war?"

But Thor leans forward with a shake of his head. "I would have Loki come with us. If we face a repeat of what happened yesterday, we may have need of his magic. And I only seek the Tesseract so I may use its power to return us to Asgard. If we take it, yet Loki escapes in our absence, my mission will still fail." He pauses, not for dramatic effect as Tony would have expected, but just to grab Loki's mostly-uneaten toaster waffle. Loki lets him take it, and he continues through a mouthful of food, "We must all three go together. It is the only choice that makes sense."

'Sense' isn't the word Tony would have used, but he lets it slide. The two Asgardians are staring at him from across the island. Just staring. Expectantly. Waiting for him to agree, or to disagree so they can make more stupid arguments. For the sake of whatever sanity he has left, he can't really do anything but let them have their way. "Okay. Fine. If you insist, Loki can come with us. But he's your responsibility, Thor. He tries to bail on us or does anything crazy? Not my problem. If I get so much as a sneaking premonition that I'm about to be fucked over in any way, I'm telling
Fury you two took me hostage and used some deep space mind control magic, and I'm saving my own ass."

Neither of them says anything. Neither of them does anything, apart from Thor eating the waffle and Loki absentmindedly tapping his fingers on the countertop. Does that mean they have an understanding?

Tony empties his mug. "Right," he says. "Let's plan this thing."
Sudden, Second-Hand Sex Magic Superpowers

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to have a calm, civil, mature conversation with Loki about relationships, which naturally ends in violence and a broken kitchen. An unexpected and unwanted guest shows up at the door bearing more than just bad news.

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you all so much for reading and for your comments and feedback! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I really cannot say that enough :)

I’ve also updated the tags and character listing based on stuff that happens in this chapter and the next.

The plan is imperfect, but it’s a plan.

Phase 1: Break into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fortress and steal the Tesseract.
Phase 2: ?
Phase 3: Profit.

Okay, so phase two is probably ‘Thor takes Loki back home’, but since Tony’s not directly involved in that, he’s leaving it off his to-do list.

Action hour is seven pm. In preparation, Thor’s back upstairs making another progress report to Asgard, and Tony’s packing supplies for the road in the event that something goes awry and they’re not able to return to the house after phase one. (There’s a real good chance something will go awry.) So far he has a wad of cash and some clothes stuffed into a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles backpack. A second backpack, sporting the image of Superman, he intends to fill with food. Just as soon as he works up the courage to walk into the kitchen. Where he’ll be alone with Loki.

Just grow a pair already, he tells himself. Loki’s chained to Thor’s hammer again. He can’t move. How much damage can he do?

For the sake of getting this over with, he’ll pretend the answer to that question is ‘not very much’. And thus he grits his teeth, leaves his bedroom, and heads toward the lion’s den.

He can feel Loki’s eyes on him as he makes a beeline for the cupboards. He can feel the caustic gaze pricking on the back of his neck. What’s worse, he can feel words starting to push their way up from his lungs, the product of unwanted questions starting to form in his brain. Questions he needs answered. Questions he doesn’t want answered. With a couple choice swears muttered under his breath, he turns around to face his demon.

Loki’s perched like a towel-clad gargoyle on a bar stool in the breakfast nook, a collection of
eviscerated juice boxes on the table in front of him. When Tony’s eyes meet his, he picks up the nearest box and pulls the straw into his mouth with an obscene-looking flick of the tongue.

“Yeah, um, I’m packing snacks for the road,” Tony says before anything worse can slip out. “Any requests? All I’ve seen you eat in three days is one bite of an Eggo. That’s not adequate ass-kicking fuel.”

“I dislike your vile Midgard ‘food’,” Loki answers. “Only these boxes of juice are tolerable.”

“Those are nothing but sugar and artificial chemical flavoring and have no nutritional value. But if that’s what you like…” There’s more nutrition-free artificial chemical sugar to be had in this house. “Here,” he says, tossing the box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch across the kitchen to Loki. “Though I have no idea why I’m trying to feed you when you obviously don’t give a shit about not starving to death. Going forward? I’m terrible at playing dad. You’re on your own. Eat whatever you want, or not.”

Loki just rattles the chain that’s once again attached to his ankle, attached to Thor’s hammer. “I would if I could move.”

“Oh right.” That’s almost enough to make him feel sorry for Loki. Not quite, but almost. “Well… Yeah, I’m still terrible at care of magical creatures. Thor can be in charge of feeding you.”

“All Thor is fit to oversee is pointless violence and idiotic quests for little gain. He is worthy only of the least of responsibilities, and bears all the cunning of a fly.” Pausing, Loki glances toward the hallway leading to the stairs. “And I am glad you have come while he is otherwise occupied. I would speak with you on certain matters without his heavy-handed interference.”

Tony’s stomach drops. Here it comes. “What matters?”

“This plan of yours. It’s preposterous.”

And there it… doesn’t come. Does Loki really mean that? Of all the things he could say now that they’re alone, he wants to talk about the stupid plan? Like a reasonable person? “You think so?”

“I do. It seems to me that you are much like Thor and tend to dash off into adventure head first without thought, but I am rather more meticulous about these things and prefer to apply some semblance of a structure to my actions. Your ‘plan’ is no plan at all.”

“No, it’s a legitimate plan,” says Tony. “We break in, grab the Tesseract, and scram. That’s part one. Then I’ve also thought ahead to part two, which is ditching you. Specifically, Thor uses the Tesseract to take you back to Asgard, where you never bother me or my planet again. I regain my status as the world’s number one hope for clean energy. Though I may have to do so from Siberia after having been branded a threat to national security due to my association with you. Which will suck. So… You know what? I am going to tell Fury you brain-slugged me. I can stoop to being a lying coward to get my life back. And that might even work out in my favor if he decides he can no longer trust me and decides to leave me alone forever. I actually have a pretty sweet life when I’m not dealing with all the crazy crap that comes from being a superhero.”

Loki just scowls at him with an expression that seems to say, How can you not be taking this seriously? Tony’s seen that one more than a few times before. It’s become easy to recognize over the years. “Tony Stark, I am trying to assist with your ludicrous quest.”

“And I am perfectly okay with the quest being ludicrous. I don’t see why we need to go into any
more detail than we already have. The more details we map out, the more likely something will go wrong and we’ll be thrown off track. But we can’t be thrown off a track that doesn’t exist. So.”

He claps his hands together in what he hopes will be interpreted as a gesture of finality. “Let’s run with this.”

The scowl stays frozen on Loki’s face a couple seconds more before he finally relents and turns his attention to the Cinnamon Toast Crunch instead. “If you insist,” he mutters. “It will not be my failure if this laughable effort falls apart.”

“He claps his hands together in what he hopes will be interpreted as a gesture of finality. “Let’s run with this.”

“Have a little faith, will you?”

Tony’s pretty sure he hears a derisive snort, but it’s a little muffled by the sound of Loki digging into the cereal box so he can’t be certain.

He fills the Superman backpack with whatever junk’s still left in the cupboard: some Lunchables, a bag of pretzels, Slim Jims, and Loki’s juice boxes, all while trying to think of what to say next. Actually, no, he knows what to say next. It’s more like he’s trying to think of how to say it. Without sounding like a dick. Or (worse) a whining sissy.

“So um,” he says as he closes up the backpack and takes way too long fiddling with the zipper tab. “I want to... uh... talk about...”

“No you don’t,” Loki cuts in, already anticipating what he’s about to say. “If you did, you would speak outright like a man instead of scurrying in the corner and muttering into your hands.”

“I’m not... scurrying...” Tony mutters. And then realizes he’s muttering and could punch himself.

“Allow me to alleviate your discomfort and complete the conversation for you. You are about to say, ‘Loki, I made a terrible mistake last night,’ to which I will reply, ‘Are you certain, Tony Stark? Because you seemed to quite enjoy yourself.’ Then you will deny willing participation in our little tryst, incorrectly citing use of magic on my part coupled with drunken lack of judgment on yours. Then I will laugh. Because I know the truth.”

And he does laugh, quietly in his throat. It’s accompanied by that classic demon grin he seems to like so much. The sound scratches over Tony’s nerves; he sucks in a long breath to steel himself against it. It doesn’t work. “And what truth do you think you know?”

Loki’s smile grows. “I recall very clearly that you played the role of instigator. You kissed me. Put your hand on my cheek, just like this.” With one slender finger on the line of his jaw, he repeats the gesture. “And then-“

“A mistake,” Tony immediately shoots back. “I don’t know why I did it. I don’t know why you went along with it.”

“Why does anyone do anything? Because we wanted to.”

“I...” Wanted to. Why do those two words disturb him so much?

“Come here, Tony Stark,” says Loki. Softly. Like he’s asking for a favor.

Like he’s granting one, Tony goes. He dumps the backpacks he’s carrying next to the table and stuffs his hands into his pockets, tensing every muscle in his upper body. That feels a little like arming himself.

“Why do you pretend to be so opposed? Is it because I am the villain you set out to defeat?
Because you desperately cling to the safety of the notion that I am ‘evil’?

“No,” says Tony. “Your evil villain status is coincidental. Also your manipulative asshole status. I’m opposed to your fantasy of our imaginary romance because I have a girlfriend.”

“Ah.” That one syllable says it all as Loki leans forward to rest his elbows on his table and his chin in his hands. It’s shorthand for the usual ‘I’ve heard that one before’ combined with a bit of ‘you keep telling yourself that, buddy’, all topped off with more sinister tones of ‘and I’m paying close attention to what excuses you didn’t give’. “Then speak, Tony Stark. I won’t judge you. I’ve had this conversation so many times before that your insecure ramblings will be nothing new.”

So many times before. Tony rubs a hand over the back of his neck. *Yeah, I bet you have...* Though something about that thought triggers a twinge of guilt inside. Or maybe pity. He pushes it away and, in opposition to everything that might be considered a good idea, sits down at the table across from Loki. “Look, here’s the thing. I admit this was partially my fault. Mostly yours, because of your creepy sex magic and mandatory cuddling, but I’m not exactly an innocent blushing flower so let’s both man up and share the blame. No more bullshit. I want to talk honestly for a minute.”

He waits for a smirk or a snort or an eyeroll or any other piece of classic Loki condescension, but there’s nothing. Not even a raised eyebrow. Loki stares back at him looking like he’s actually listening for once.

“I made a mistake,” Tony goes on. “And that is something I rarely admit, so believe me: this is a big deal. And a big mistake. If you want the whole truth, I’ve been feeling really shitty about a lot of things this past week. I’m in a bad place, and when I’m in a bad place, I make bad decisions. Last night I made a bad decision. An epic bad decision. The Mona Lisa of all bad decisions. As a result, I now feel even shittier. I’m in the middle of a cycle of shit.”

Loki’s response is surprising. “Why do you feel so terrible?” Not so much what he says, because that’s a valid thing to ask, but the tone. He’s not accusing. Not snarking. Not poking around for trouble. It’s just a simple question, plainly asked, a little like a friend.

It’s probably an act engineered to undermine Tony’s defenses and get him to divulge too much detail, but what the hell. Now that this conversation has started, it’ll be harder to stop than keep on going. There are too many things that need to be said. It doesn’t really matter who Tony says them to as long he gets them off his chest and out of his mind. He can bore Loki with the drama of his personal life. If anyone deserves boredom and the tedious job of having to play makeshift confidante, it’s Loki.

“I mentioned my girlfriend. I should probably also mention that lately things have been going...” *Terrible. Disastrous. Irreconcilable. No, don’t admit any of that.* “...a little rough. On the outside we like to pretend that everything’s perfect, like a fill-in-the-blanks romance novel about a roguish billionaire finding true love with his spirited, girl-next-door assistant. But everyone knows those books are total crap, and... I’m not a dashing literary hero. Not even a two-dimensional cardboard cutout Mr. Right. I’m a narcissistic jerk with a crippling emotional disability when it comes to taking anything seriously. And if she’s a heroine, then it’s in a post-modern feminist fable where she realizes her career is way more fulfilling than putting up with me. Not that we’re always bad together: I’m not saying that. There are good moments. Just... A lot of fights. A lot of disappointment. I’m good at disappointing people. You want to know the last thing I said to her before running away to join S.H.I.E.L.D.’s band of Merry Men? A childish threat about moving back to Malibu and leaving her in New York. That’s how we parted. Nice, huh?”

“You weave a grim tale of yourself as a lover, Tony Stark,” says Loki. Still not snarky. Still
unnervingly sympathetic. “So many faults in your own eyes.”

Tony shrugs. “Or maybe I’m trying to highlight one of my few good points. I might be a total fuck-up when it comes to mature, responsible relationships, but at least I’m not delusional.”

There’s a long pause where Loki just taps his fingertips on the table, thinning his lips like he’s thinking up something amazing to say. But all that comes out is, “Hm.” Then, after a beat, “I suppose by telling me all this you mean to shame me for threatening the precarious balance that is your love life?”

“No.” Tony shakes his head. “That’s not what I mean. It would be a bonus if you did feel ashamed of yourself, since everything about you is shameful, but I’m telling you this because I want to make it clear that last night was easily the dumbest thing I’ve ever done. I feel shitty – phenomenally shitty – and whatever you’re trying to do? I can’t have any part in it. Because ever since I woke up this morning I’ve been praying to a God I don’t even believe in that my relationship doesn’t end because of you.”

He almost expects some stupid ‘god’ comment because of that. It doesn’t come. Loki’s staring down at the table. Silent.

“I know it’s going to end. Probably pretty soon. Again, no delusions. No use pretending there’s any happily ever after coming my way. I just wish it would end for a better reason than I couldn’t keep my pants on with a space terrorist in Atlantic City. I think-“ The name catches in his throat. Stuck. He can’t say it in front of Loki. “-she deserves better than that. A lot better.”

“Somewhat late for such wishes...” Loki murmurs, his voice too soft to scan for any hint of emotion or inflection.

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “It is. But I can still own up to my failure and feel like hell for the rest of my life because of it. Wouldn’t want to miss out on that.”

Loki goes silent again. Whatever he’s thinking (and it’s obvious he’s thinking from the way he fidgets and pushes cereal crumbs into patterns on the tabletop), he keeps to himself. It would be easier if he spoke. It would clear the tension if he had anything to say, some snide remark or biting comment, because right now there’s just this feeling of awkward incompletion hanging in the air. The weight should be lifted after all that venting, but it isn’t. Something else is still waiting in the wings.

“Do you love her?” Loki suddenly asks. One little phrase, spoken so casually, and it slams Tony like a cheap punch.

There’s only one possible answer. “Yeah...” Not exactly a winning declaration, but it’s concise.

Loki holds up his hands, either like he’s surrendering or presenting something. Hard to say which. “Then I wish you all the best.”

“I don’t believe you, but thanks.”

“I am being sincere. For once.”

His grin doesn’t look sincere, but it does look a little self-deprecating, which might be his version of sincerity. His eyes, though... those don’t match. There’s something hard and dark lingering just out of view behind his eyes. Not predatory, like Tony’s seen before, but not safe either. Warning. Defensive. Ready to protect itself at any cost.
Tony forces himself to look away. “Yeah so. Um.” He clears his throat. “Good talk? I better get back to packing now. There’s a lot to do, and then I have to put my armor back in working order, and…” I’m just going to shut up now and stop pretending this isn’t really awkward. Also shut up before he says something else he really regrets, like, “I’m sorry.” Damn it.

“For what?” asks Loki.

“For… just generally being me and doing the fucked-up things I do, and if I let you think-”

Loki pounces almost before the words are out of Tony’s mouth. “Let me think?! What am I, a wide-eyed maiden to fall heartbroken over your ill-given affections?! I am a god!” And there’s the god comment. It had to come out sooner or later. “You flatter yourself to think you could be anything more than a convenient solution in a time of need!”

Now this would be an overreaction if Tony’s ever seen one. “Wow. Okay. Point taken. And I… am sorry again for automatically launching into post-one-night-stand mode. Force of habit. But FYI, from experience, a snarky ‘in your dreams’ gets the point across way better than rabid denial.”

“Why would I not deny that which I find insulting?” Loki snaps.

The smart thing to do would be to let this drop. Let Loki have the last word and just walk away. Tony even considers it: in his mind’s eye, he can easily see himself standing up and leaving the room with nothing more than one last ‘okay then’.

But Loki looks so righteously offended right now, so easily rattled…

Tony smiles. “Because methinks the lady doth protest too much?”

He really should’ve let it drop. With a snarl that’s pure vicious fury, Loki lunges forward. What happens next is almost too quick to register, but Tony thinks it goes a little like this: Loki grabs him by the front of his shirt, hauls him over the table, whirls around, and slams him into the wall hard enough that sparks swim in front of his eyes. When he struggles to move, the drywall behind his shoulder blades cracks and crumbles.

“You, Tony Stark, are nothing!” Loki hisses, inches from his face. “No more than a particle of dirt clinging to the vast fabric of the universe, a tiny and momentary spark among ancient stars, of no greater importance than a flea in the ear of a dog. I suggest you silence yourself before your mouth causes you too much more trouble!”

Probably a reasonable suggestion, and Tony nods in agreement, doing his best not to grimace at the pain shooting up his back. A shower of dislodged plaster dusts his shoulders. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I am that. And I should do that.” He refrains from mentioning how Loki’s mouth causes him far more trouble: being a smartass doesn’t really seem like the best course of action given the circumstances. Loki is not in a joking mood. Loki is in a show-puny-mortals-who’s-boss mood, and has one hand twisted in the fabric of Tony’s shirt and the other a quick little squeeze away from crushing his neck.

The hand tightens in warning, just a bit, as if Loki can feel what Tony’s thinking. Fingertips dig into skin, probably hard enough to bruise. Loki’s cold eyes stay locked in place. Tony could look away (he should look away: psycho stare isn’t exactly instilling in him a great sense of safety), but when you’re held up against a wall with only a madman’s whim dictating whether you breathe or not, outright defiance won’t help things much. The best he can hope for is to convey a sense of ‘I’m not afraid of you’ by staring right back, unblinking. Even though he’s pretty sure his heart is
pounding loud enough for Loki to hear or even feel through the thin layer of skin covering his jugular.

Loki says nothing. Tony likewise says nothing. The staring contest drags on, seconds ticking by, and slowly, slowly, Loki’s icy rage fades. The hand on Tony’s neck relaxes, sliding down to rest on his shoulder. Loki looks... calmer.

“Okay,” Tony says. “I think we’re done here?”

No answer. No reaction at all.

“Yeah we’re done. I’m... I’m going to leave. So if you can just let go of me now...” He reaches up to pry at the fingers that are still clinging to his shirt, pulling Loki’s hand away with a lot more ease than he was expecting. Loki puts up no resistance. Not in a cooperative way: more like a ‘wait what’s wrong now’ kind of way. And it takes Tony a second to figure out what that ‘wrong’ is.

Loki’s magic porn-touch is negligible compared to what it was the previous day. It’s enough to make Tony’s pulse race and his skin flush hot, but on top of the adrenaline rush already pounding through his system after being slammed into the wall, the effect is almost lost. Even holding onto Loki’s hand, searching and sensing for any hint of something more, there’s nothing . So either Loki’s given up on being the God of Sexual Harassment, or... “Huh. I think I’ve worked up an immunity to your magic.”

“That’s not possible,” says Loki, quietly, with a slow shake of his head.

“Possible and factual. Whatever you did yesterday doesn’t work any more. Look at this.” He opens his hand, flattening it palm to palm against Loki’s. “See? Nothing.” And he lifts his other hand to Loki’s arm, feeling only an echo of yesterday’s shockwave as he touches bare skin. “No reaction.”

Or, more accurately, no reaction on Tony’s part. But Loki... It’s Loki who flinches, Loki’s jaw that tenses, Loki who draws in a sharp little breath through his teeth.

A puzzle piece of memory clicks neatly into place. “It affects you,” Tony says. When he shifts his hand, Loki tenses again, eyes widening. Unbelievable. “The magic affects you too. What you said about transferring energy... whatever you give, you get back just the same. That’s the way it works, isn’t it?”

Seems that way, but just to test the theory he lays both hands out on Loki’s arms. The reaction is immediate: Loki jerks back, a little *nnn* sound escaping his throat, and a second later he’s sinking down onto his stool with his eyes closed. Definitely the way it works. How about that.

“No,” Loki manages through clenched teeth, “its...”

No further word on what ‘it’ is. Loki drops his head forward, eyes still closed, and pulls in a deep breath. Like he’s steadying himself, or meditating, or preparing for something. And that might bode ill. Meditating sorcerers probably aren’t the safest thing to be touching and trying to subdue
with sex magic. But before Tony can convince himself to let go (because really, when else is he going to have a chance like this lord any kind of power over Loki?), Loki’s hands are rising up in one smooth gesture to land on Tony’s chest. Not grabbing his shirt this time, not pushing him away: just sitting there. Gently. A kind touch.

It tingles at first, spreading warmth. Loki draws another calming breath, and the feeling grows. Familiar electricity begins to surge through Tony’s veins and dance across his skin, circling his entire body before settling heavily between his legs. One more breath and the magic hits a sharp spike to flood his senses and weaken his knees. He wrenches his hands away from Loki’s skin, and son of a bitch it’s hard as hell to break that contact with all the animal lust building up inside, but it makes no difference. Loki’s touch alone is enough now. More than enough. Whatever happened before to negate it, Loki’s figured out how to fix the problem and has come back swinging.

“Not so immune now, are you?” Loki purrs. He’s found his voice again, no longer incapacitated, while Tony can only grunt a wordless reply. It’s with a gentle smile on his lips that Loki tilts his face up, but when he opens his eyes...

Tony sees only a split-second of cold rage before the hands on his chest shove him away with the force of a shotgun blast. He lands hard on one shoulder and skids across the floor before slamming into the kitchen island. Searing pain rips down his back and arms and up through his skull as the wood of the cupboard door splits on impact. For the second time since the start of this horribly misguided conversation attempt, stars explode before his eyes and the edge of his vision clouds gray. He shakes his head to clear it; his head throbs in protest.

Loki’s voice, saturated with acid wrath, rings tinny in his ears. “Do not... ever... think to try that again!”

Groaning, he rolls forward and just lets his body collapse onto the tiles, trying not to vomit as he does. No, he won’t be trying that again any time soon.

Only a total idiot would try that again.

Only an asshole with a death wish would think about trying that again.

Okay but maybe if petting Loki really does make him calm down, it might be worth looking into...

He’ll wait until he has a better understanding of Loki’s magic before trying it again.

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Answering the doorbell is not one of the things Tony would have listed as a major concern for the day. It would be classified as a minor inconvenience at best, especially in comparison to what he just had to deal with. But Girl Scouts, a weird religious cult, traveling vacuum cleaner salesmen, or even a rampaging ax murderer would be preferable to what he finds standing on the front step when he opens the door.

“Agent Romanoff.” He almost adds an ‘aw, fuck’ to that, but opts to keep it civil. For now.

“Mr. Stark,” she replies with a cool nod.

He should probably be upset to see her. Angry, even, that S.H.I.E.L.D. tracked down his secret lair so quickly. But all he can muster is a feeling of inevitable defeat. Like this had to happen sooner or later, and is he really surprised to find out it’s sooner? No. The dogs were going to sniff him out eventually. And here they are. Romanoff’s standing there in front of him, alone and unarmed,
which means there are a couple dozen gunmen hiding down the street within shooting distance. And probably a jet circling nearby. “Where’s the cavalry?” Tony asks.

“No cavalry. Just me.”

Uh-huh. “Somehow I find that hard to believe. Coulson isn’t up a telephone pole with a pair of binoculars?”

“Are you going to invite me in, or do we have to have this conversation in the doorway?”

Tony takes a step back and opens the door wide, gesturing with his arm to usher her into the front hall. “Of course. Where are my manners? Let’s go chat in the kitchen.” Where you can lock horns with Loki while I figure out what to do about you. Something about that scenario sounds oddly appealing. “After you.”

Romanoff’s wearing a frilly and feminine teal blouse that shows off her hair nicely, and a sleek gray skirt that shows off her ass even better. Under normal circumstances Tony might try to be a little sneakier about watching said ass sashay its way down the hall to the kitchen, but under ‘I’m about to be ripped a new one’ circumstances, all bets are off. It’s not like he can get in much more trouble at this point, so might as well make the best of things and enjoy the view.

They round the corner into the kitchen, and if Romanoff’s surprised to see Loki sitting there in the breakfast nook, she doesn’t show it. Not even a hitch in her stride. Tony, on the other hand, is a little surprised, but only because Loki is wearing clothes for the first time in days. Real clothes. Seemingly out of nowhere (no, scratch that: definitely out of nowhere), he’s conjured himself a perfectly tailored black suit, black shirt, and pale gray tie. He even fixed his hair, losing the guinea pig mop in favor of that sci-fi party mullet he sported back in Stuttgart. The whole look would be better completed if he were sitting in his elegant pose reading a book or newspaper or even an iPhone instead of the Cinnamon Toast Crunch box, but hey, as the song goes, two out of three ain’t bad.

Romanoff ignores him as she skims along the island and over to the coffee maker. Loki ignores her right back. They appear to have a pre-arranged mutual understanding that involves each pretending the other doesn’t exist, the story of which Tony might be interested in learning one day (though he suspects it might have something to do with those bizarre scars Loki had). What Romanoff doesn’t ignore is Tony’s wandering eye.

“Classy,” is all she says to him as she starts a pot of coffee. Obviously, she expects nothing better.

“I’d ask you if you want something to drink,” Tony replies, “but since that would be redundant I’ll just cut to the chase and ask you why you’re here.”

“Wouldn’t that also be redundant?” she counters. “I think we both know the answer. I won’t patronize you with some long spiel about your role in assisting a highly dangerous criminal to escape from custody, and how that now makes you a wanted man.”

Tony nods. “Good. Because that sounds like the kind of dull conversation I usually try to avoid.”

She throws a quick smile over her shoulder, but says nothing else while the coffee brews. Once it’s finished, she pours two cups and hands one to Tony.

“Aw, deliberately excluding Loki from our little coffee date? Not very friendly, Natasha.”

“This is between you and me, Tony,” comes her smooth reply. “No need to involve the riff-raff.”
“And what exactly is between you and me? I thought I’d made it clear our passion was doomed from the start and your girlish fantasies must be left forever unfulfilled.”

“You know, you’re almost cute when you’re trying too hard.”

She reaches down into her purse, and Tony freezes. Knowing Romanoff, there’s an 80% chance she’s going for some kind of weapon. (Actually, make that 90%.) But no: all she pulls out is a plain old tablet, which she pushes across the island. Tony feels his shoulders relax, but only halfway. It’s still Romanoff, after all, and she’s still up to something.


Tony hesitates only a moment before tapping the screen. It’s a news clip, dated the previous night, showing...

Well, shit.

...explosion at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, just after 2:30 this afternoon. The incident took place in one of the older facilities no longer in use, but preliminary reports indicate that several individuals were inside at the time. Emergency personnel have so far confirmed twelve injuries, three critical. Police and fire officials have yet to identify the cause of the blast, though they have speculated that an electrical surge in faulty or outdated equipment could be to blame.

There’s more. The video looks like it goes on for another minute, switching over to a reporter on location. No need to watch that, though. Tony knows what happened and seeing footage of the destruction won’t help anything. He stops the clip and slides the tablet back over to Romanoff.

“That wasn’t me.”

“Oh, I know. That was Thor. We have substantial evidence linking him to the explosion. Just like we have substantial evidence that he came here afterward.”

So that’s how she tracked them down. Thor’s explosion drew S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attention, then he got his clumsy ass recorded flying right back to this address. Great. With a sigh, Tony rubs his forehead. This is exactly the kind of position he doesn’t like to be in. The kind where he’s bent over the table because somebody else screwed up. “I guess it’s too much to hope that you’re here to arrest Thor but leave me alone?”

Romanoff’s answer is unexpected, to say the least. “Actually, no. That’s exactly why I’m here. Fury is prepared to let you walk. A minimal amount of cooperation is required, debriefing and some follow-up, but after yesterday’s events and the surprises we found at Brookhaven, not to mention the cleanup we had to do, our priorities have changed. We just want the Asgardians. You can go.”

She says it all so effortlessly, like it might even be true. If only words could be believed as easily as they’re spoken. “Okay,” says Tony. “You’ve got my attention. Gimme the sales pitch.”

“There’s no sales pitch. This isn’t a negotiation. I’m here to tell you what’s going to happen, not dance around a compromise. And what’s going to happen is that Thor and Loki will be returning to S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters with me. As a show of good faith, you can follow on your own.”

“And then?”

Romanoff shrugs, like what she’s about to say is entirely inconsequential. “You’ll have a meeting with Fury to discuss your actions over the past three days, after which you’ll be free to leave and
return to your girlfriend in New York.”

Ah. He was wondering how long it would take her to pull the ol’ dagger-to-the-heart routine. “Have you involved my girlfriend in New York in this escapade?”

“Not yet. We saw no reason to disturb her. As far as Ms. Potts is aware, you’re at S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters right now. Incidentally, she’s called Coulson twice and he’s getting tired of inventing lies about the highly classified project you’re working on that makes you unavailable for outside contact.”

And oh, but she knows how to twist the knife.

“Just think that over, Stark,” she adds after a brief pause. “Think about what you’re doing, and who you’re doing it for. I believe Coulson told Ms. Potts something about your project finishing tonight. So we’ll be out of excuses soon.”

“Right.” He lowers his head, staring down at his hands. “I understand.”

“So you’ll be cooperating?”

“Can I have a minute to consider the offer?”

“Of course.” And just like that, she turns her attention to her coffee, blowing on the surface and taking a delicate sip.

“Can I make a phone call?”

Her lips smile over the rim of the mug. Wordlessly, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a slender black phone, sliding it over to him.

The phone Tony left on the helicarrier. Goddamnit, does she ever not think of everything?

“You’re welcome,” she says. “You have fifteen minutes.”
Chapter Summary

Tony, the world’s worst boyfriend, finally talks to Pepper. Then Romanoff is a bully and Coulson isn’t any better. So when Tony opts to be contrary just for the sake of being contrary and Thor turns against S.H.I.E.L.D., Loki-wan Kenobi is their only hope. Until he loses his mind.

Chapter Notes

This chapter kind of marks the unofficial end of part one and the beginning of part two. Things are about to take a sharp left turn. So... yeah.

And as ever, thank you so much to everyone who's reading this, and I hope you enjoy. :)

A handful of missed calls and new texts sit waiting on Tony’s phone, which is about par for the course since only a handful of people have this number. Two texts from Rhodey, which he’ll need to deal with, but not right now. Two calls from the senior VP of something he doesn’t care about. A text from another VP of something he would care about under normal circumstances. One call and one text from Pepper. Call dated Wednesday night. Text Thursday morning.

He flicks the text open. Four words only.

We need to talk.

Knowing the rock is going to drop is one thing. Actually watching it fall is a whole different story. And feeling it land... it hits with a dull thud just below his heart, sinking down and churning up a surge of queasy dread. Sickly heat pools in his shoulders as a bitter taste blooms in the back of his throat.

With numb fingers, he holds up the phone and presses the call button.

It takes Pepper too long to answer. “Hi,” is all she says. Clears her throat.

All Tony says in return is, “Hi.”

Noise rustles on the other end of the connection, sounding a lot like Pepper covering the phone with her hand, followed by a few muffled words: “Just give me two minutes.” When she finally turns her attention back, it’s with an apology. “Sorry. I’m trying to wrap up a meeting.”

“On a Saturday?”

“Yes, Tony, on a Saturday.” Her voice is thick with annoyance. “I work a lot of Saturdays, remember?”
He remembers. It’s one of the star players in their fight arsenal. “Right. You spend every waking moment selflessly running my company to prevent me from making unsound business decisions and—”

“Don’t even start,” she cuts over him with a warning.

“No? You don’t want to have this conversation again? I thought it was one of your favorites.”

Through the grating pause that follows, he can almost feel the tension that he knows is tightening her jaw. Her eyes will be squeezed shut, crinkled in the corners, and her mouth thin as she bites her lower lip. He knows that face.

*I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I wish I could say so, but Jesus fuck... if this is about to end, I’m not going to go quietly.*

“Why are you such an asshole?” comes her eventual reply.

“Defense mechanism,” he says. “It’s the natural human response to being dumped by text message.”

“I didn’t...” The sentence never materializes, but instead devolves into a low groan. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“That we need to talk. A real, adult conversation for once.”

“About?”

“A lot of things.”

A lot of things that probably all boil down to one big thing. “Okay. Sure. I don’t know if I’ll make it back to New York tomorrow, but definitely Monday. Monday afternoon, we’ll sit and talk about your things.”

“No,” she says, “because I won’t be here. I’m flying to L.A. in a couple hours and won’t be back until Tuesday night.”

“What’s in L.A.?”

From her frustrated sigh, it’s either something he should know about or something she doesn’t want him to know about. “Just... nothing. Meeting my cousin and a couple of her girlfriends. I need some time away, and it’s Jen’s birthday, and we made this last-minute decision to go to Disneyland...”

“Disneyland,” Tony repeats.

“Yes. It’s very popular with groups of single women in their thirties.”

Oh. So this is how it ends. Not with screaming, not with threats, not with hateful insults honed sharp on too much truth. But subtly, with one little word sliding into the conversation. One word finding its foothold and becoming the new reality. As if nobody would notice its intrusion.

“I see. So you’re a single woman now.”

No sound from the other end. Not even a breath.
“When did that happen?”

“I can’t do this, Tony,” she says, so quietly. “I... I can’t. Not like this. Not over the phone.”

But he presses on: what else is there to do? “When did it happen? When did you decide?”

“I don’t know! Maybe sometime since you stormed out of here eight days ago? Eight days where you didn’t even bother to call or take two seconds to send a damn email, and I’m left wondering if you’re even coming back at all? Because when you left you made it sound an awful lot like you were leaving me.”

“No. No, that’s not what I was doing. I was leaving...” All the stupid fights we keep having, over and over and over... “I was just being a dick. I was a dick. I am a dick. So what we need to do, once you’re back from being single in Disneyland, is get together and talk about how much of a dick I am, and—”

“No,” says Pepper. Groaning. “Tony, this is why I don’t want to talk over the phone. You say something stupid like that, and I have no idea if you’re deliberately being an asshole or if it’s your roundabout way of apologizing... I don’t know if you’re serious or sarcastic... I just don’t know. I never know with you. That’s why this is so...”

She takes a breath.

“...impossible,” she mutters.

Impossible. Not possible. Unable to continue. Devoid of hope. Tony closes his eyes. The phone is hot against his cheek and ear. Or maybe it’s just his skin that’s burning.

“...Tony?”

He clears his throat. “Yeah. Yeah, I heard you.”

“I... I have to go,” she says. There might be a hint of her voice cracking in those quiet words. But then she coughs, and sighs, and makes a decisive little ‘mm’ sound, and the hardened professional tone takes over. “I’ll give you a call when I’m back. We can set up a time to... meet and talk and... I’ll call you. Goodbye, Tony.”

“Bye,” he echoes, though she may not hear because the call disconnects almost immediately.

Lowering the phone, he looks down at the screen. Call duration one minute fifty seven seconds. That’s all the time it takes for everything in the world to fall apart.

And that leaves thirteen minutes three seconds to sit on the bed with his head in his hands, trying to pull it all back together before he has to answer to Romanoff.

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The mood in the kitchen has changed by the time Tony returns. No more awkward nonchalance or cool uncertainty: now the air is saturated with tension that feels ready to sizzle into flame at any moment. Romanoff’s come around to the other side of the island to face down Loki with one hand on her waist and the other holding some kind of Star Wars pistol. Loki, standing now, has his fists clenched at his sides and his face contorted with the kind of rage that indicates he might be trying to murder her telekinetically. And then Thor. Down from the second floor just in time for mayhem, he’s positioned himself between the two of them, though from his stance it’s impossible to determine whether he’s siding with his untrustworthy brother or has decided to honor his
tenuous alliance with S.H.I.E.L.D..

Romanoff’s eyes flick over Tony’s way. “Everything in order?” she asks, voice far too calm for the circumstances.

Tony just shakes his head. “Nope.” And that’s all he’ll give her. Everything else is locked away to deal with some other time, when he feels up to the task. Maybe never.

“Do you have an answer for me?”

“Since I’m still a little unclear on what the question is... no.”

“Stark,” she says, in a tone that means ‘quit wasting my time’.

“Just humor me,” he continues as he steps up to take a place beside Thor. Neutrally positioned, neither with her nor with Loki. “Outline for me, exactly, in detail, what will happen. Step by step. Step one: I follow you back to base. Step two? What happens next?”

“If you want the honest answer, you’ll probably wait around a while before Director Fury has time to see you. As I said, our focus has shifted recently and you’ve become low priority.”

“And I’m guessing you’re all about the ‘hurry up and wait’ mentality, and wouldn’t allow me to come in for an appointment sometime tomorrow rather than sitting around aimlessly today?”

Romanoff’s answer is exactly what Tony’s expecting. “We’d prefer to keep you onsite and available.”

“You mean ‘under surveillance’,” he says.

“I mean ‘available’.”

“You mean ‘in prison’.”

“I mean what I said.”

It might be a subconscious reaction to the building hostility, the way she shifts her hold on her ray-gun. At least Tony’s assuming it’s a gun. It’s not like anything he’s ever seen before: compact, white and cylindrical with a shallow curve to the handle and something like a toy battery pack of pale blue plastic on top. The blue glows enough to be visible even in the kitchen’s bright light, lit from the inside. Tony’s stomach twists in sudden recognition.

Shit. She can’t really have...

“Stand behind Thor, Tony Stark,” Loki’s voice hisses at his back, “if you value your life.”

“You plan on shooting me with that?” he asks Romanoff. “Let me guess, phaser isn’t set to stun?”

“I don’t plan on shooting anyone,” she replies, but levels the gun at him all the same. “Provided everyone cooperates, there’ll be no need for violence.”

“You know, you’re doing a really bad job of making me want to come with you. Coulson was a lot more effective with his scientific razzle-dazzle bribery approach.”

“Stark...” It’s that warning tone again. The ‘quit fucking around or I’ll blast you with my sci-fi gun’ tone. “Please stand aside. You can make your way to the front door. There’s a car waiting outside.”
“What about your show of good faith in allowing me to fly back to base on my own?”

She has no answer for that.

“No,” he says, holding up his hands. “Sorry. That’s my decision. I’ve thought it through, but I can’t see how this can end well for me in any way. At best, I get my ass handed to me by Fury, a bunch of my tech is confiscated, and I’m placed on some kind of threat list that has S.H.I.E.L.D. agents showing up at my door every few weeks for a check-in. Oh wait! That’s happening already. But at worst? Do I even want to think about the worst case scenario?”

“I already told you, right now you’re low priority and-”

“Low enough priority that you’re standing in my kitchen with a HYDRA gun in my face trying to black-bag me into your car out front?”

“The gun is for the Asgardians, Tony. Not for you. That’s why I’m asking you to stand aside.”

He questions himself even as he does it. Why bother? Why make this stupid, heroic gesture, and for somebody he should rightfully hate? But Tony’s always been a contrary kind of guy. The first one jumping up to do something just because somebody else said it couldn’t or shouldn’t be done. And if Romanoff says he shouldn’t oppose S.H.I.E.L.D.? Well then. He takes two steps to the left, positioning himself directly between her and Loki. “Give me a reason. Just one. One good reason why I should listen to you instead of my Asgardian buddies here. Who, I will admit, are total jerks because Thor trapped me in a magic chain and Loki threw me into a wall, but despite that... I still trust them more than I trust you.”

The tiniest speck of annoyance manifests in Romanoff’s flaring nostrils. It’s probably the only emotion she’s capable of showing. “You don’t even know who you’re siding with.”

“I’m not siding with anyone. A wise Ent once said, ‘I am on nobody’s side, because nobody is on my side’. What I’m doing is standing against you.”

She holds his gaze through a string of heartbeats, not speaking, not moving, not blinking. Like she’s waiting for...

...the phone to ring. Silently, she nods to Tony, directing him to answer it. He slides over to the wall and picks up the handset already half knowing who’s going to be on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Stark.”

Bingo. “Agent.”

Coulson’s voice crackles over the bad connection, distant and distorted by a metallic echo. “I’ve been listening in on your conversation.”

Tony nods to himself. “I’d be disappointed if you weren’t. Where are you calling from, anyway? Let me guess: a flying saucer hovering over my house?”

“Close enough,” says Coulson. “I wanted to let you know that you should give Agent Romanoff’s suggestion some serious thought. You’d be better off getting into the car. We don’t want this to get ugly.”

He says that like it’s not already ugly in here. Like this whole day hasn’t been one big heap of ugly
so far. Tony shoots a glance over his shoulder at brooding Thor and snarling Loki. Snarling Loki looks like he might be trying to silently snarl some words. “Uh,” he begins, but whatever he wanted to say flies out of his head as Loki starts with the violent little hand gestures. Yes, Loki is trying to mouth something. Something angry. Too bad Tony’s terrible at reading lips.

“I can give you five minutes to peacefully exit the building on your own. After that-”

Coulson’s words are interrupted by a sudden buzzing in Tony’s head, followed by Loki’s voice rattling angrily through his skull. Get over here, you fool!

He can’t help it; his body instinctively jerks away, even though it’s impossible to escape from a sound that feels like it’s blaring through headphones jammed directly into his brain. So that’s the Jedi mind trick.

“-who will escort you out by whatever means necessary,” Coulson’s voice continues as if nothing just happened.

“Right, right,” says Tony, edging back toward the breakfast nook, carefully stretching out the phone cord as he goes. (Who the hell still uses a corded land line these days?) “Sorry, how many did you say again? I missed that part.”

“Eighteen out front. Another twenty-two in the back.”

“Right.” Fuck. If he stretches the cord as far as he can, he’s just able to position himself in front of Loki. Thor moves over to stand at his side. “Thought you’d like to know we’re surrounded by S.H.I.E.L.D. agents,” he mutters to Thor, covering the phone mouthpiece with his hand.

“Then we fight our way out,” Thor replies.

“You’ll never make it!” hisses Loki. “I am sure the rest of them carry the same weapon the woman has. You must free me from this chain. It is the only way!”

But Thor just shakes his head. “No.”

Tony returns to Coulson on the line. “Can we negotiate this? See, I don’t really like the idea of surrender without a bit of bargaining first.”

Whatever Coulson says, he doesn’t hear, and doesn’t care, because Loki and Thor are bickering in his ear.

“Thor, you know it is our only chance! Undo the chain and release my magic!”

“No! We will fight our way-“

And then Romanoff has to join in the argument, because three people talking at once isn’t enough for Tony. “Stark, move away from the Asgardians.” A ‘step aside’ motion with the gun follows her words.

“No, do not listen to her,” says Loki. “Stand behind Thor!”

“I’m not listening to either of you!” Tony snaps, and only realizes he just yelled into the phone when he hears Coulson’s confused ‘pardon?’ over the line. He covers the mouthpiece again before speaking to Loki. “I’m sort of the only thing protecting you right now. If Agent Romanoff has to go through me to get to you-“
“It will go through you, Tony Stark, and it will still hit me! You do not know what that weapon can do! Stand behind Thor, or stand behind me, but do not stand in its path!”

“Sorry, this is as far as the phone cord stretches.”

With one of those patented ‘you’re an idiot’ looks, Loki knocks the phone out of his hand, sending it skittering across the tiles. Tony’s not exactly sorry to see it go. “…It was a boring conversation anyway?” he says.

“Stark,” Romanoff warns, “if you don’t move…”

This is getting ridiculous. “No,” he says, turning to face her. “I won’t move. I decline your offer to arrest myself, tempting as it is. Instead, I opt to take my chances with the God of Thunder and this other guy who allegedly is a very powerful sorcerer even though so far I’ve only seen him use his magic to remove bathroom mirror fog.” He can hear Loki’s annoyance at that. Good. “Between their superpowers and my supervision while they own your ass, I think we’re set.”

“That’s your decision?” she asks.

“Final answer, Regis.”

Slowly, she nods. “I’m sorry to hear that. Coulson, send them in.”

The next few seconds are like something out of a movie, only with less shaky camera work. The patio door explodes into a rain of glass as gun barrels followed by armored troops smash through. A resonating crash from the front hall probably means the front door’s been busted down too. The house rings with shouted orders, the kind of military code that could be a football call for all the sense it makes. Almost before Tony can blink, he and the Asgardians are blocked in by a wall of guns. Some the regular kind with bullets. Some the unnerving white ones, bigger versions of the pistol Romanoff carries.

“Down on your knees!”

He can’t tell who said that; they all wear full face masks

“Now! On your knees!”

“The chain, Thor!” Tony hears as he instinctively kneels, hands folded on the back of his neck. “Release me!”

From his vantage point, he can see Thor’s fingers flex before clenching into a fist. Amazing how easy it is to tell what a person is thinking just from watching his hand.

“It’s our only hope!”

At this point, neither talking nor fighting their way out of here is going to happen. Tony’s pretty sure of that, based on the number of weapons currently aimed at him. Just a guess. Loki-wan Kenobi really is their only hope. Tony elbows Thor in the leg. “I say listen to him.”

And that earns him the business end of a white gun in his face. “Don’t move!”

Another one butts up against Thor’s chest, ordering him to his knees. Thor complies. So does Loki, sinking down to the floor along with all of Tony’s hopes for escape.

It’s weird what comes to mind in situations like this. Not panic. That already passed, in the
briefest of flashes, at the first sight of soldiers. Not questions on how he might get out of this mess. Those will come later, once he’s locked up and has had enough time to get good and angry. The revenge plots always take a while to form. He knows that from experience. So right now it’s just acceptance. Like this is inevitable: S.H.I.E.L.D.’s here, they’re doing their job, and they’re going to take him away. Okay. He can live with that. It’s fine for now, and almost a comforting feeling to give up and go with the flow. He’ll get out of it. He always does. But this fight’s over.

“The chain,” Loki whispers.

Then Thor nods. And from his kneeling position, carefully situated next to Loki, his hand reaches out to grasp the handle of his hammer.

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No matter how hard Tony tries, he can’t find a way to adequately describe what just happened to him. Sufficient words do not exist in the English language. The closest he can get is ‘turned into a series of sentient particles and forced through a rift in the space-time continuum’. There’s more to it than that, including some stuff about extra dimensions and different ways of moving that seemed to make perfect sense when he was in loose particle form, but his newly reconstituted human brain isn’t capable of processing any of that. In fact, it’s having enough trouble trying to reconcile the comparatively simple problem of why he is now standing in the middle of a desert when a moment ago he was kneeling in front of a HYDRA gun in the kitchen.

All the cells in his body seem to be vibrating. He has the nasty suspicion it’s because they’re still trying to fit back together in their original places. Some move more than others, like they’re shifting, and the sensation is nauseating. His stomach tightens with a sickening heave as he turns to look at Thor and Loki.

Thor has a faint green pall to his face, his mouth is hanging open, and he’s breathing heavily. So maybe nausea is a normal side effect to what just happened, if anything about just having teleported to God-knows-where can be called normal. Loki, though, looks like death warmed over: white as a sheet with hollow cheeks and bloodless lips. While Thor’s at least steady on his feet, Loki sways, unbalanced with one of Tony’s backpacks looped over each arm, staring at nothing with glassy eyes. He takes one wobbly step before dropping the packs and falling to his knees. Like Cinderella at midnight, the illusion of his fine suit begins to crumble away, disintegrating into gold powder and then nothing at all. When Loki lurches forward and falls face first into the dirt, he’s wearing only the towel.

“Oh, shit...” Tony mutters under his breath. He clamps his arms around his middle and draws in a few deep breaths to quell the nausea, which doesn’t work, because now his blood is buzzing and it tickles. “Thor, for the love of all that’s holy, please tell me all of this is normal. I don’t want to know what just happened. I don’t want to know how we got here, or even where we are. I don’t think I can handle that yet. Just please, please, tell me everything is okay and this is all fine and Loki’s going to stand up any second now and take us back to New Jersey and we’re not going to die.”

“Everything will be... fine?” answers Thor, neither sounding nor looking the least bit convinced of his own words as he kneels down next to Loki.

“Not good enough. I want you to tell me, right now, that you’ve done this before and it all worked out eventually and I shouldn’t worry about how my skin feels like it’s a tiny bit too big right now, because I kid you not, I’m really close to freaking out.” Also really close to puking as panic squeezes his chest. “Just please humor me with empty reassurance,” he adds through clenched teeth.
Thor tries to smile, but it looks more like a grimace. “I am sure all will work out in the end, Tony Stark.” Then he places his hands on Loki’s shoulders and carefully rolls him over.

Tony’s expecting Loki to be unconscious again. Not fully awake, snickering to himself, and wearing a big old shit-eating grin.

“Loki?” Thor shakes his brother’s shoulder. “Can you stand?”

“Yes,” says Loki, and he lifts his head only long enough to glance around before falling back down and laughing like a fool. “I mean... no.”

Well, this is great. Teleported to the middle of nowhere and now their only mode of transportation has turned into a giggling idiot. “What’s wrong with him now?” More wrong than usual, Tony should add.

“Magic,” Thor answers, huffing out a frustrated sigh as he stands back up. Loki, meanwhile, rolls onto his side to curl into a ball, shaking with laughter. “He’s used too much power and the accumulated magic has overwhelmed him.”

“He looks drunk.”

“Yes, it distorts the senses, much like drink.”

“Literally drunk on power,” says Tony. “Awesome. So what do we do now? How long does this last?”

‘An hour or two,’ he’s expecting Thor to say. “A day and a half,” is Thor’s actual answer, making Tony’s heart drop.

“A day and a half?! We have to wait a day and a half for him to sober up enough to get us out of this place?!”

“I am sorry, Tony Stark, but there is nothing we can do. Today is only the eighth day of the cycle. Loki’s magic will restore itself after moonrise at the end of the ninth day. Until then...” He pauses, scanning around them in a full circle to take stock of their location and looking way too much like a man with a mind to sit right where they are for the duration. “We wait.”

The hell they will. “No. Sorry. I’m not sitting around for a day and a half or however long it takes for Loki to get over himself. We need to figure out where we are and find a town.”

“But we could be anywhere in Midgard.”

Exactly what Tony’s afraid of, but he can’t let himself dwell on that. “Until proven otherwise, for the sake of my sanity, I’m going to choose to believe we’re still in the United States of America. Because if your dipshit brother dumped us in the middle of Kyrgyzstan or somewhere...” Nope, not worth even thinking about. He shoots a glare down Loki’s way. Loki’s managed to pull himself up onto his knees and is now almost choking he’s laughing so hard, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. He stills just long enough to grin at Tony like a demented jack-o-lantern before collapsing again. This time onto his back, writhing in the dirt. Towel slipping.

Tony knew he had a good reason for preparing a Ninja Turtles backpack full of extra clothes, and frustrated as he is with everything to do with Asgardian magic right now, he has to admit he’s incredibly grateful Loki remembered to bring it. “I think I’m going to take advantage of Loki’s incapacitation to get him fully dressed for once,” he says to Thor, grabbing out a t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts. “Give me a hand with this, will you? We may be in the desert, but the pants
rule still applies.”

One of these days, Tony’s going to remember. One of these days, the file folder in his head that stores such gems of information as ‘don’t feed a mogwai after midnight’ and ‘never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line’ will also contain the rule ‘do not touch Loki under any circumstances, ever’. That day, though, is not today. The bolt of Loki’s magic tears through his skin, fiercely powerful, surrounding every cell in his body in the blink of an eye. He pulls back with a shout, overbalancing and falling flat on his ass.

“Tony Stark,” Loki groans, reaching out to grope at the air as Tony scrambles away.

“Loki’s touch has so strong an effect on you?” Thor asks.

“Yeah,” says Tony. Hoo boy, yeah. “A very... unpleasant effect.” Which is a bit of an understatement. He waits a moment before trying to stand, letting the magic fizzle out. It’s not exactly wise to trust his legs just yet.

Thor looks to Loki with a thoughtful frown. “Strange. I have never known it to cause negative reactions.”

*Only psychologically*, Tony thinks, but says, “Mm. Negative. Very negative.”

“But you are mortal,” Thor concludes with a shrug, like he’s rationalizing to himself, “so perhaps it affects you in unexpected ways.”

Unfortunately no; based on Loki’s explanation, Tony’s reaction to the magic is entirely within the realm of ‘normal’. But Thor doesn’t need to know that. Thor just needs to manhandle Loki into some clothes so they can get going and find their way back to civilization.

Easier said than done. Loki’s stuck on the idea of climbing all over Thor for some clumsily executed snuggling, clothing be damned. Five minutes in and the shorts are on but the shirt’s only over his head. Whatever effect his magic has on Thor isn’t helping either. The more Loki tries to cuddle, the more Thor loses interest in trying to dress him in favor of stroking his hair and squeezing his shoulders and murmuring assurances that everything will be fine, they are safe, they are well, and Asgard is waiting to welcome them home. An overabundance of brotherly protection.

“I love you,” Loki sighs into Thor’s shirt.

Tony turns away as Thor’s face crumples. Loki’s punch-drunk antics are one thing, but this... watching this feels a little too much like intrusion. He stares up at the sky, pretending he’s not there, pretending he’s not listening, as Thor mumbles a quiet reply.

“I love you too, brother.”

The sun hangs almost directly overhead. So it has to be close to noon, which means, Tony realizes as his stomach does a joyful leap, they’re probably still in the States. It was just after one thirty when he called Pepper. Traveling west a couple timezones would put them roughly somewhere between Texas and Arizona. Or, okay, Mexico, but that’s still on the right continent and a shit-ton better than the opposite side of the world.

Unless they also traveled forward or backward in time, but Tony’s happier believing Loki doesn’t have the power to do anything that crazy.

They’re in Texas. They have to be in Texas. Maybe if he keeps telling himself that, it’ll come
true. He looks back at Thor, who’s now all hunched up with his forehead resting against Loki’s ear. “I think I know where we are.” In a very vague sense, but that’s still better than what he had a minute ago. “But we need to get a move on. Every minute wasted is a minute closer to sundown, and I really don’t want to be stuck out here at night with coyotes and scorpions and drunken rednecks on ATVs. Can you walk and cuddle at the same time?”

With obvious reluctance, Thor pulls himself to his feet. Loki’s both cradled in his arms and clinging to him as if somebody’s life depends on it. (Maybe it does. Tony wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if Loki’s magic ended up having a death clause attached.) “I can walk,” says Thor. “Which way do we go?”

“Straight,” Tony answers. “Until we find a road. And then we follow the road until we find a town.”

“And how long will that take?”

Between one and eighty hours? “Not too long,” he promises, clapping Thor on the shoulder. “There are probably towns all over this foreboding and inhospitable part of... where we are. Yeah. All over. You carry the prisoner, I’ll carry the supplies and worry about navigation.”

“I love you, Tony Stark,” Loki’s muffled voice says, filtering out from the shirt bunched around his neck.

Tony grits his teeth. “No you don’t, you’re drunk.”

“I do. I do I do I do I do I do. I love my friends. We are all good friends now...”

Yes, because good friends are frequently slammed into walls and thrown into kitchen cupboards before being teleported across the country and dumped in a wasteland of tumbleweeds... though there’s no use arguing with a magic-drunk halfwit so Tony lets it go. Good friends forgive each other like that.

“Just... follow me,” he tells Thor, hitching up the backpacks, one on each shoulder. “Funny enough, this isn’t the first time I’ve been stranded in a desert.”

But this time it’s unlikely that a rescue helicopter’s going to appear, and if one does, it’ll belong to the guys he has no interest in seeing right now. Time to start walking. Just put one foot in front of the other, and repeat, and repeat, and repeat again a couple hundred thousand times while hoping there’s a road somewhere ahead. Because six juice boxes and a backpack of salty junk snacks aren’t going to go all that far in keeping three people alive.

Focus on the positive. Stay positive. For the love of fuck, there has to be something positive.

Positive: he hasn’t had time to feel sorry for himself or mope about Pepper in at least fifteen minutes. That whole thing seems kind of pointless now.

Nothing like facing potential death and rattlesnakes and a long walk across parched earth to really put things in perspective.
Chapter Summary

While Loki intimately acquaints himself with a motel bedspread, Tony and Thor head out for food and a heartfelt bro-chat about important, manly things. Like booze and Frost Giants.

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for the total lack of Loki in this chapter. But it's largely *about* Loki, so maybe that evens things out? :P

Never in his life has Tony been so glad to see a Texas license plate on a rusted-out old Dodge Ram as it rumbles its way down the dirt road stretching before him. Never before has a neon sign flickering KOZY KLOUD MOTEL – VACANCY on the outskirts of a dusty little town looked more inviting.

Room 108 isn’t exactly the Presidential Suite. Not even the Economy Family Suite, but it’ll have to do. Thor sets Loki, who looks to be halfway asleep, down on a floral nylon bedspread as Tony takes stock of their new lodgings: faded curtains hiding a dirty window complete with dead flies, an air conditioning unit that emits a whiny grinding noise when he switches it on, a big tube TV bolted to the dresser, and an ashtray, a phone, and an alarm clock glued to the night table between two queen beds. He checks the drawer: bible not glued down. Maybe it’s meant to be stolen.

The bathroom features a standard flimsy-curtained shower-bath, peeling linoleum, and only one small towel, which Tony uses to wash his face and hands of all the desert dirt. Cloudy brown water takes its time swirling down the sink’s clogged drain. He hucks his shaving kit on the bathroom counter and the backpacks into the closet: a closet that’s nothing more than an alcove just outside the bathroom, with no door and only two of those stupid hangers you can’t take off the bar.

“So, uh,” he says to Thor, poking his toe at a stain on the headache-inducing red and brown carpet, “you’re probably used to better accommodations. I know I am. But since the Sofitel Podunk Texas doesn’t appear to exist...”

“This will be adequate for now,” says Thor. “We need only wait until Loki’s magic is restored. Then...” His voice trails off, leaving the last word hanging in the air.

“You still think we should go after the Tesseract?”

“What other choice do we have, Tony Stark?”

Tony sinks down onto the end of the bed, careful to avoid Loki’s squirming feet. ‘Not much of a
choice’ would be the answer to that question. Thor needs to take Loki home. Thor needs the cube to take Loki home. Tony, having fucked up everything and painted himself into a corner before digging his way into a spectacular hole, is now along for the ride. (And may soon find himself applying for refugee status on Asgard if things keep going the way they are with S.H.I.E.L.D.)

“We should revisit our plan,” Thor continues. “If Loki is recovered by tomorrow night—"

“No. We left my armor back in Atlantic City, and without it I’m won’t be much help.”

It’s depressing to admit, but saying those words out loud make the situation seem suddenly worse. He won’t be much help. Actually, he won’t be any help. Without the suit he can’t fly, can’t fight, can’t bust through walls and go on crazy adventures with the Gods of Intergalactic Chaos. At best he’d be the smart-mouth sidekick. At worst he’d be in the way and get somebody (namely himself) injured or killed. Or he’d simply be left behind, no longer even factoring into the equation.

“Fuck. Fucking fuck, Thor. Why does everything have to be so...fuck!” His head drops into his hands and then somehow his fingers are pressing into his eyes, hard enough to make light bloom in psychedelic patterns. “I need to get my suit.” Needs to, like it’s become a life necessity or something: water and air. And son of a bitch, it makes him feel like a schmuck to see how dependent he’s become. How useless and weak and small he feels without it. He can easily adapt to life on the run, falling from the luxury of a penthouse suite down through middle-class vacation home mediocrity and into some rat-hole motel. Take away his money, power, influence? Fine. He’ll survive. Take away the suit? It’s worse than being naked. It’s being helpless.

He needs it. Not even to wear it: just to know he has access. To see it and know it’s there. That safety line would be enough. “We’re closer to Malibu, where I have all the older models stored. But the newest version will be ready to go by now, back in New York. Unfortunately, I’ll bet you anything in the world S.H.I.E.L.D. has both of those places under surveillance so tight they’ll know the minute a pigeon shits on the roof.” Fuck. Again. Just, fuck. He looks up. “D’you think Loki would be able to beam in, grab the suit, and beam back out before anyone could do anything?”

He realizes what a ridiculous suggestion that is even before Thor makes the ‘surely you jest’ face. But desperate times, yada yada, desperate measures. “I mean, provided we can convince him to listen to us. And then to do what we want. And also to come back. I know sending Loki on his own to retrieve a highly specialized piece of weapons technology is not the greatest plan, but he’s the only magic user we have in our party and I’m fresh out of ideas that actually make sense.”

“I will think of something,” says Thor. “I have been in worse positions, and faced greater dangers. We will retrieve your armor, Tony Stark. And then we will take back the Tesseract. This can be done.”

Thor sounds so sincere that Tony can’t help but feel a little more optimistic. Because dammit, he needs to believe this will all turn out in the end, and he didn’t make all the wrong choices. “Okay. I’ll take your word for it. But right now... well, would you be up for taking a break from being superheroes to get some food? I’m starving.”

To his relief, Thor replies with an enthusiastic nod. “Yes, I agree. We should eat.”

“Awesome. You want to chain Loki to the hammer again?”

“No... Loki shifted us as soon as I released his shackles. The chain fell to the floor and I did not have time to grab it.” He looks almost angry with himself as he speaks. “I fear we must leave him here alone.”
“You think he’ll be okay? And by okay I mean safe, for everyone in this building?”

“I think... he will be safe,” says Thor. “And perhaps it be for the best that he is left free. The enchantments on the chain restrict his magic, and right now he is overcome by it and will need to release some of that energy. He will be better off unbound.”

Both of them look down at Loki, who’s lying on the bed with his arms outstretched, hugging the mattress. Giggling to himself and rubbing his face against the bedspread.

Tony cringes. “Yeah, he looks good. Or at least harmless. For now.”

“Agreed. Let us find food.”

In hindsight, maybe tacos weren’t the greatest idea. Tomatoes keep dropping on Tony’s pants, and his hands are covered in salsa verde. “We should’ve gone for burgers,” he says to Thor, who’s trying to cram the whole thing in his mouth to keep it from falling apart. They also should’ve gone for napkins.

But other than the mess, things aren’t bad. There are worse places to sit and relax and eat than on a rocky ridge just outside of town, watching the sun sink below the horizon in a ripple of orange and pink as the starry blanket of night creeps in from the east. It’s peaceful out here. No street lamps, no traffic, no sirens. No S.H.I.E.L.D., no Loki, no imminent threat to world peace. No cell phones or awkward conversations. Just tacos and a six-pack and a bottle of JD in a paper bag.

“You know, this is actually kind of nice,” says Tony. “Obviously, I’d rather be at home in my living room, but as far as being a fugitive on the run goes? This doesn’t totally suck. I can pretend I’m on vacation.”

Thor nods and makes an agreeable ‘mm’ sound through his mouthful of food.

“Vacation in rural Texas. I’m sure that’s ironically popular with some subset of hipster culture. Why do you think Loki dumped us here anyway? As opposed to--” He pauses to look around. “--anywhere else in the world.”

“Magic,” Thor explains. Then swallows. “Loki must shift to places he knows or can see, or else he must guess at the destination and could end up in the middle of a river or inside a mountain. I now believe he was trying to take us to the Bifrost site where he sent the Destroyer, but lost control before he could transport us the entire way.”

Makes sense, Tony thinks, and then, immediately, I can’t believe the crazy shit that now ‘makes sense’. “Guess it’s a good thing he didn’t try to take us to Stuttgart, otherwise we’d be drowning in the Atlantic right now.”

“Mm,” Thor says again, starting into his second taco.

“You want a beer to wash that down?”

Nod. “Mm.”

“Or something a little stronger?” Tony shakes his paper-bag bottle.

Once again, Thor stuffs the entire taco into his mouth before speaking. “I will try that.”
The look on Thor’s face as he takes a generous swig is worth the risk of taco backwash. He manages to choke it down, but just barely, before shoving the bottle back at Tony. “Fuck!” he growls, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tony can’t help but smile; that’s definitely on the top-ten list of things he never thought he’d hear Thor say. “You have that word on Asgard?”

“Tony Stark, we invented that word on Asgard. We also invented far superior liquor; I would not expect swill so foul in the lowest tavern.”

“Hey, this is a classic American product you’re badmouthing. The face of my country.”

For a moment Thor wavers, the expression on his face uncertain of whether or not Tony’s joking. Looks like he decides to err on the side of caution. “I apologize. I did not mean to offend.”

Tony just grins. “Apology accepted on behalf of the great state of Tennessee if you take another drink. I want to watch you make that face again.”

“No,” growls Thor. “It tastes like Jotun piss.”

“I hope that’s a normal Asgardian thing to say, not something you know from personal experience.”

“It is a normal thing to say,” Thor assures him, again probably taking things too seriously.

“Just have a beer instead. You like beer, right? Vikings have to like beer.”

Nodding, Thor grabs a can of PBR. And then goes for a third taco. “The beer is passable. Though... it still tastes like watered-down Jotun piss.”

“Yes, I think I may agree with you there,” says Tony, holding out his hand. “Taco me.”

This time he’s a little more careful and manages to eat almost the whole thing before the end falls apart, scattering oily beef and half-melted cheese across his lap. Nice. Maybe he should’ve gone with Thor’s down-it-all-and-worry-about-chewing-later tactic. The third one, he eats bent over with his knees spread wide, dropping bits of escaped food onto the dirt between his feet. Better.

“Can I ask you something?” he says to Thor once he’s finished and topped it all off with a couple swigs of Jack.

“Of course,” Thor replies through his fifth taco.

“Keeping in mind that this is just me thinking, and I tend to think too much, and maybe I’m on the wrong track here, but this keeps sticking in my head. ‘Tastes like Jotun piss’. Common kind of thing to say on Asgard. I’m assuming you say a lot of stuff like that?”

“I suppose.”

“All of it meant to be pretty derogatory?”

“Jotunheim has ever been the enemy of Asgard, its people little more than violent savages. We bear them no love. Why?”

“Like I said, just thinking. For the past couple days I’ve been wondering a lot about what the hell Loki’s doing and why he’s doing it. In opposition to popular media belief, I don’t think the concept of ‘evil’ really exists. What we call ‘evil’ is usually just greed, ambition, hatred, fear,
revenge, or plain ol’ crazy. Any or all of those in one bad mixture. And Loki? I think he might be all of them. That’s my assumption based on Fury’s intel reports and, you know, just talking to him for more than three seconds. But I didn’t really give the whole big picture too much more thought until right now.”

“What do you mean?” asks Thor.

“Just bear with me a sec and I’ll get to that. But first things first. When we landed on the beach the other day you told me Loki wasn’t Asgardian. He’s Jotun. Frost Giant. Whatever the hell that is, I still don’t even know, but you make it sound pretty bad. And it didn’t seem important then, but now things are starting to line up.”

“How so?”

Tony takes a long pull on the bottle before continuing. “A lot of the time people think I have my head too far up my own rectum to notice anything other than how awesome I am, but really the opposite is true. I’m observant. I remember things. And I can add one plus one to make two. So now all these little pieces keep coming together and making me wonder. Like what you said in that first conversation we had, about how your brother wouldn’t do the things S.H.I.E.L.D. said he did. That gets me thinking that up until the little incident in Puente Antiguo, Loki was just your average, run-of-the-mill dick doing the average, run-of-the-mill dick shit you told me about. Enough to piss everyone off, but no epic world-destroying. Not yet. Just being a pain in the ass. Am I right?”

“Those are harsh words, Tony Stark.”

“Harsh but accurate?” Tony asks.

And Thor concedes, “Harsh but accurate.”

“Thought so. Now. Moving sideways here a minute. You insulted my shitty whisky by saying it tasted like Jotun piss, then confirmed this would be a normal thing to say on Asgard. Off the top of your head, how do you suppose that makes Loki feel?”

Thor looks stunned. “I...”

“Just consider that. On the one hand you call him your brother, but on the other you casually toss out these remarks that make it clear you don’t think too highly of his people.”

“No,” says Thor, shaking his head. “Those are not his people; Loki is not one of them. He is-”

“You said it yourself,” Tony interrupts. “Jotun by blood. You also said he didn’t know until recently. So I’m thinking this sounds like a perfect catalyst for turning him from run-of-the-mill dick to batshit fucking crazy, if he suddenly finds out his family is a lie and he actually belongs to a race that’s widely despised by the people he thought he belonged to.”

But Thor doesn’t get it; he only shakes his head more vehemently, shutting out what he doesn’t want to hear. “No. Loki knows he is loved as part of our family.”

“But that’s just it,” Tony persists. “He clearly doesn’t know. Now correct me if I’m wrong at any point, because I’m cobbling this together from a lot of different sources. But Loki finds out he’s adopted. That in itself is a pretty big blow. At the same time he finds out he’s not actually Asgardian after all. No, he’s Jotun, which is something he’s learned to hate his whole life. Something he’s grown up listening to you hate. The only logical conclusion he can draw is that you now hate him. Everyone does. So he goes on the offensive. Offense is the best defense,
right? Get everyone before they can get you. He’s convinced you hate him? Good, he’ll hate you right back, twice as much, even though you’re stranded on Earth and have no idea what the fuck is going on. He’s off the deep end and would rather kill you than risk talking to you and having all his fears confirmed.”

“No!” This time, Thor jumps to his feet, teeth-baring scowl on his lips and hands clenched into fists. “I faced him! I told him! He is my brother still, in my heart, no matter his true birth! But he is too blinded by self-pity to see my love for him!”

Groaning, Tony rubs his face. Playing family mediator isn’t exactly how he planned to spend the evening. “Thor, it’s a good thing you’re pretty, because you’re honestly being a real moron right now. It’s not about what you tell him. Actually, that probably makes it worse, because you still see nothing wrong with throwing out those Jotun comments and therefore don’t get Loki’s point of view. It’s like…” He has to scramble through his brain for a useful analogy. “Okay, those four friends of yours that came after you. One of them was a woman.”

Thor doesn’t sit back down, but at least his hands relax as he frowns uncertainly at Tony. “Yes. Sif.”

“Yeah. Now think of some of the comments men might make about women. All the bottom of the barrel, really shitty stuff. How much grief do you think your friend Sif got for fighting alongside you instead of acting like a lady? How many times do you think she’s heard that women are weak, inferior, have no business on the battlefield? Would you ever say anything like that, about any woman, in front of her? And then tack on a quick disclaimer that you’re only talking about women in general, but not her, because she’s your friend? And she shouldn’t be offended? Women don’t know how anything about war; they should all go back to the kitchen! But not you, Sif. You’re not that kind of woman; you’re different, you act like one of us men. What do you think she’d do?”

“It’s not the same…” Thor insists. His voice is softer, though; he knows the argument is feeble as his head fills with doubt.

“All Jotuns are monsters and we hate them,” says Tony. “But not you, Loki, you’re not that kind of Jotun. You pretend to be one of us.”

Thor sits down at that. No, not so much ‘sits’ as ‘drops’, hard onto the rock, like his knees give out. Slowly, he runs a hand through his hair. And again. He doesn’t immediately speak, but he sighs, and that tells enough. Eventually, very quietly, he says, “Loki tried to destroy Jotunheim.”

“Of course he did. How else would he prove he’s ‘not that kind of Jotun’ and redeem himself? You told me you had just killed dozens of them for no reason at all before your dad kicked you out of Asgard, so how should he interpret that?”

This time, Thor doesn’t answer at all.

Siding a little closer, Tony clears his throat. “Look, maybe I’m talking out of my ass here and shouldn’t have said anything. Like I told you, I tend to think too much. Most of it’s probably complete bullshit because it’s junk I thought of just now coupled with other junk I thought about today while walking through the desert and getting heatstroke and frying my brain. But what I was thinking is… we can’t do this without Loki’s cooperation. You were right back at the house when you said he should help us. He’s the only one who knows how to use the Tesseract, so even if we don’t necessarily need him to get it, we’ll need him once we have it. And he’s not going to cooperate unless something changes, so I’m just trying to understand where he’s coming from. Where this kill-all-humans thing started. You might want to take him back to Asgard, but I sort of
want to ensure his plot to destroy the Earth doesn’t work out. Best way I can think of to stop that is to stop whatever it is that’s driving him to do it.”

“And how do we do that?” Thor mumbles.

Well... “I think you start by talking to him and actually listening to what he says.”

“I have talked to him and-”

“You’ve probably talked at him. Sorry, pal, but I’ve known you for all of a week and already I can tell you’re a terrible listener. You need to fix that. You also need to broach this topic with your brother, and if I know Loki he’ll respond by launching into some big tirade, which you will listen to and internalize. And then you’ll make insightful comments that maybe lead into a real conversation.”

“I... can try,” says Thor, sounding pretty damn defeated.

“No.” Tony claps him on the shoulder. “Do. Or do not. There is no try. Sort out your family shit while there’s still time. And you know what? This might be a good time. I think Loki’s coming around to being part of the team. He saved our skins earlier. Not just his own: all three of us. That’s a good sign, right?”

Thor’s reply is so quiet Tony almost misses it. It sounds like, “Just you.”

“Sorry?”

“Just you, Tony Stark,” he repeats. “Loki would have shifted with just you. He had both his hands on your shoulders. I knew what he was about to do, and so I grabbed his arm... which is why I missed the chain.”

“...Oh.”

There should be something else to say in response. Something like ‘that’s ridiculous’ or ‘Loki was probably expecting you to hold his arm’ or any other similar, meaningless words in an attempt to rationalize what happened and dispel the weird feeling starting to twist in Tony’s stomach. Of course Loki wouldn’t have meant to escape with Tony while leaving Thor behind...

But Thor changes the subject before ‘something else’ becomes necessary. “Loki used to be happy,” he says, voice no more than a low rumble. “He was always happy, when we were children. I was the angry one, quick to fly into a temper. Loki always knew what to do to diffuse my rage. When I was in the worst of moods, he knew he only needed to make me laugh by putting a piece of cheese up his nose and everything would be fine. I have this memory... a very distinct memory of arguing with my mother, screaming terrible things, until she finally snapped at me that she was thankful fate had sent her at least one kind-hearted son, so that Loki’s bright joy could counterbalance my violence and negativity. That was how people saw him. Bright joy. Always happy, always smiling. Causing some mischief, yes, but never anything malicious. Silly little jokes and nothing more. He liked making people laugh.”

He draws a breath: one pause that stretches into a chasm severing past from present. “I do not know what happened. When he started pushing deeper and more seriously into his magic... Before, he would link his arm though mine and sing this horrible, crude song we both found hilarious, but soon he could scarcely meet my eyes and his smile seemed forced, like he was putting on a show of pretending to be the person he had once been. For years I watched him sink further into silence and secrecy, unable to help no matter what I did. And eventually he came out
the other side, but... changed again. This time hardened and sharp like forged steel. He spoke with bitter words. His jokes turned cruel and his smile became a sneer. He built a fortress around his heart not only to shut out any who dared to come close to him, but also to keep everything he might feel secure and hidden. He locked himself away, and every time I spied a crack in the wall and tried to dig my way in, he would patch the gap and build his defenses up stronger than ever.”

“And that would be the Loki we all know and love today,” says Tony. It’s a dumb thing to say, and he regrets it the second he opens his fat mouth because it does nothing to lighten the mood or lift the dead weight of Thor’s words bearing down on both their backs.

Thor just chews his lip. “Over time I sometimes felt like the brother I remembered might be coming back. He lost much of that sharpness and eventually seemed at peace with whatever had tormented him for so long. The guarded secrecy never left him, but sometimes I thought the wall might be thinning as little fragments of the true Loki shone through.” Letting out a sigh that drags out into a pained groan, he drops his head and presses a white-knuckled fist against his cheek. “But now all of that is undone and he is back to where he was a thousand years ago: vicious, cold, deceitful... Only this time he is also riddled with ambition and a mad desire to wreak havoc on everything in his path. So while I appreciate your attempt to help, Tony Stark...”

“Right,” Tony replies. He can read between the lines here loud and clear, message shouting out from Thor’s rigid, hunched shoulders: _Loki is fucked up beyond redemption and there’s nothing we can do now but put him in a cage to stop him from hurting anybody. Nice try though, Stark, smugly thinking you have all the answers and can fix a thousand years of interstellar Viking drama through the amazing ploy of getting them to talk to each other. That B minus in Psychology 101 really paid off. Pick up your Nobel Peace Prize right over here!_

“But I mean it might still be worth a shot,” he says to Thor, though it doesn’t make him feel any less like a meddlesome dickhole. “Just, you know, having a real conversation and... um. Yeah. Never mind. I have no idea what I’m talking about, but have this tendency to keep moving my mouth in the hope that at some point if I say something with enough conviction, it'll sound like good advice.”

“Hm,” says Thor. And that’s all he gives before he stands up again to pace a few steps away. He looks back once at Tony and draws a breath to speak, but words fail and he’s left with a mouthful of empty air.

“Where you going?” Tony asks, though the answer is obvious. _Away._

“Walk,” Thor grumbles. “I need to... think over some things.”

“Aw, come on, that’s not fair. We get to go through all your family crap in detail and then you bail before I have a chance to dump on you about my probably-ex-girlfriend?”

“Oh... I...” Awkwardly, Thor shifts his weight from one foot to the other and makes a hesitant, incomplete movement to sit back down. “Forgive me; I can stay if you wish to discuss your troubles.”

“Nah, I’m just shitting you. Go ahead. I don’t want to talk about my stupid feelings.”

He wants to sit and drink away those stupid feelings instead.

It’s only after Thor’s ambled off and disappeared into the darkness that Tony dares to open the gate and actually face the reality of what happened between him and Pepper earlier. Replay the conversation. Take it all in, word by word, wrapped up with all the stormy silences full of all the
things that didn’t get said. It hurts, yeah, that’s a given. But it’s not a sharp pain. This feels more
like the dull ache of nostalgia, looking back with resigned longing to something already filed away
in the archives of the past.

You had a good run, the memories say as his mind’s eye flicks through a long loop of images. Not
perfect, but more good times than bad.

Maybe it’s a blessing that things ended now, before he could really fuck it up and tarnish the
legacy of the one thing he had almost done right.

He takes a drink in a silent toast to Pepper, feeling the alcohol burn its way down his throat in a
slow cascade. Here’s to us. We gave it a shot, and it was fun while it lasted. Unfortunately,
there’s no participation award when it comes to relationships. No ring for well-intended yet failed
attempts.

For that, there’s just drinking by yourself.
An Adequate Summary of Last Night's Events

Chapter Summary

Listening to magic-drunk Loki is a terrible idea. Talking to sober Loki is a worse idea. Going along with Loki's crazy schemes is probably the worst idea of all.

Chapter Notes

Okay so. There are a couple specific warnings attached to this chapter. The first is for references to a past non-con situation (nothing graphic or descriptive at all, but it is mentioned briefly in conversation). The others, for reasons of spoilers, I'm sticking down in the end notes. If you like to know in advance what you're getting into, please see the notes down at the bottom of the chapter.

If you're the kind of person who's okay with any and all crazy plot twists, go ahead and read on. This is something that was vaguely alluded to earlier, so I'm hoping it doesn't come totally out of left field.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Tony’s key card doesn’t work is because he’s trying to open room 107. The second time (after drunkenly squinting at the dirty plastic number 108 on the door long enough to convince himself that, yes, this is his room), it’s because the key he’s using is actually a Starbucks card he found in his pants, and no matter how many times he swipes that thing down a groove alongside the deadbolt plate, nothing’s going to happen.

The colors on the card swim through his blurred vision, all fine detail drowning in a current of booze. “Oh right.” It’s starting to come back to him. This door has an old school metal key chained to a big wood chip, which Thor took because... Yeah, now he remembers. They went to buy booze after getting tacos. And Thor said they couldn’t go back to the room to eat and drink because Loki needed to stay alone, and Tony said, ‘Okay, whatever,’ just to get him to shut up and stop talking about magic in front of the cashier. Then Thor insisted on taking the key to stop Tony from sneaking back to the motel later. Which would be exactly what he’s trying to do now. Funny how these things work out.

Closing his eyes, he leans against the door, its smooth, painted metal pleasantly cool against his face. Maybe he could sleep leaning here, except gravity. “Loki!” he yells at the peep-hole, and thumps his hand once. “Lemme in, your damn brother stole the key!”

No answer. No sound from the other side.

“Loki! I know you’re magic-drunk but I’m drink-drunk and probably more drunk than you right now so get up and Gandalf this door open already. The elvish word for friend is mellon.”

And nothing again.
“Don’t make me beg, you asshole. Because I won’t. I’ll pass out first. Then you’ll feel bad for making me sleep outside.” He listens against the door. Then bangs his fist, hard, twice. “Loki? Did you die in there? If you died, I’m gonna be real pissed off.”

Nope, not dead. There’s a sound in the door exactly like a deadbolt sliding back, and then a chain jangling down. The door creaks open like something out of a cheesy haunted house, pulled by unseen hands.

Tony grins. “Thanks,” he says as he stumbles inside to collapse across the end of the unoccupied bed. The cheap, nylon bedspread crinkles under his weight and sticks to his sweat-damp skin like plastic film, but it’ll do. He’s slept on worse. “Night, man.”

In his peripheral vision, just before he closes his eyes, he catches Loki’s waving hand gesture. “Tony Stark,” says... No, wait, that doesn’t sound like Loki.

He lifts his head, peeling his cheek from the bedspread. “What the...”

In all honesty, it’s probably better that he’s drunk and exhausted. If he were sober and alert, his mind would have the capacity to react properly to what he sees instead of just resignedly thinking, ‘Oh... that’s weird.’ Loki’s smiling at him. And Loki still looks like Loki, but only in the most rudimentary and generic way. The basics are all there. Face shape. Placement of features. Floppy black guinea pig curls. The fine details, though, have changed: shallower eyes, smaller nose, fuller lips. Softer and more delicate all around. He looks like...

With a yawn and a stretch, Loki rolls onto his back. Except it’s more like her back.

Yeah, that’s what Loki looks like now. A female version of himself.

Two weeks ago Tony would have attributed this kind of thing to the worst case of beer goggles in human history, but now he knows there’s (unfortunately) a more likely explanation. “Did you randomly turn into a woman?”

Loki laughs in reply, a throaty, humming laugh through closed lips. He... um... she... seems very pleased with... herself. “It was not random. Sometimes the magic chooses what it wishes to be.”

“I see,” says Tony, nodding as if he understands, because why not? This makes at least as much sense as cross-country teleportation. “So the magic decided do a little switcheroo?”

“Do you like it?”

Tony swallows. “Um.” There is probably no safe way to answer that question.

“I seem to recall something,” she says slowly, raising one leg before crossing it over the other in a languorous motion. “Something you said yesterday evening about if I were a woman...”

“Yeah, well, I say a lot of things and, uh... That was one of those things that seemed like it would be really awesome at the time but now it’s come true and isn’t. Like you know, when you think it would be a good idea to stack a hamburger and a hotdog and a steak all in the same bun, or put the deck furniture in the pool so you can sit on it underwater? Or fly around in your Iron Man suit after eating a whole thing of sweet and sour pork from the 7-11? That one turned out real bad. So yeah.” He nods again at Loki, because that’s what you do when trying to make a point. Only...

“Wait, what was I talking about?”

“Me,” Loki answers with a silly smirk.
“Right. Right. You and the thing I said. But what I meant was, this is weird. Definitely weird. Just when I was getting used to you as a guy, suddenly... all the extra complication. And while I’ve always been a fan of boobs, don’t get me wrong, I think I’d be more comfortable if you changed back?”

With a little ‘ngh’ sound, Loki sticks out her bottom lip in a spectacular pout. The kind that would’ve had Howard Stark warning her that a rooster would come perch on it if she didn’t smarten up. “You think I should change back? Really?”

“Yeah,” says Tony. “Yeah, for the sake of a lot of things I really think you should change back right now.”

“Ngh.” Again. She makes a face and groans in disappointment, but nonetheless sits up in bed. “I can try. For you, my Tony Stark, I will try. But sometimes the magic makes up its own mind, and then it will not listen to me, no, no, no... But I can try.”

And that’s all Tony can ask for, right? The ol’ college try. Loki, with eyes closed and fingers steeped, draws in one long, smooth breath after another. It looks like a promising sight, and for a second, Tony thinks it’s going to work. The magic ripples over the surface of Loki’s skin. She shudders as it rolls through her body, from head to toe, momentarily blurring her features. Eyes, nose, mouth, chin all inexact and clouded. Like Tony’s looking at her through foggy glass.

But that’s as far as it goes. Whatever magic Loki needs to transform back, she either can’t summon it or can’t hold it. The fog recedes. She opens her eyes, takes one look down at her unchanged body, and starts laughing in that same unhibited, maniacal way she (he?) did back in the desert when they first landed. “I can’t,” she gasps. “I... can’t... I can’t... can’t change, can’t shift form... magic doesn’t want that.”

“Your magic is a lamewad with a dumb sense of humor,” says Tony.

His stupid comment only makes Loki laugh harder, falling back onto the bed and rolling over to bury her face in the pillow. Tony’s mouth twitches in response. Just a smirk at first, but growing into a full-out grin as the contagion of laughter spreads through his booze-soaked body and pools in his stomach before pushing its way out. He laughs just to watch her laugh. The way her shoulders shake and she clenches her fingers and toes. He does the same; he can’t help it. Monkey see, monkey do.

“So I guess you’re stuck like this?”

“Until balance is restored,” she answers through the mound of bedding that covers her face.

“Tomorrow after moonrise?”

She lifts her head. Bites down on the side of her thumb. Eyes unnaturally bright. “Or the other way.”

“The other...”

“We were interrupted last night.”

The laughter fades in Tony’s throat, dwindling down to an awkward groan and sputtering out with a cough. “Oh... uh.” The other way. Energy balance. Right. Right. Right...

“Mm.” Slowly, Loki extends her hand to beckon him nearer. “Come over here, Tony Stark.”
**I guess I could do that,** says one half of Tony’s brain. The other half, the half that’s usually a little more logical and better at thinking before acting, says... well, it’s too fatigued to argue and also says, **I guess I could do that.** Why the hell not? If single women can go to Disneyland, single men can go over to Loki’s strangely inviting bed in a shitty motel in Texas. He wobbles his way up onto his hands and knees, struggling to stay upright, and shakily stands. Loki’s hand stretches out, luring him forward.

This isn’t a terrible idea. Not at all.

Loki laughs her humming laugh as he approaches, licking her lips through a wicked smile and stretching her arms above her head to squirm and arch off the bed. She’s wearing, he notices now, a leftover Stark Expo promotional t-shirt. The logo – his name – sits splashed across her chest like a gift tag.

*Not a terrible idea, not a terrible idea, not a terrible idea, not a terrible idea...*

One finger rises in a gesture for Tony to stop as he reaches her side. Her hand hovers inches from the button of his jeans.

*Not a terrible idea...*

She crooks her forward to close the gap and stroke down the length of his fly. It’s hardly any contact at all, a light touch over layers of denim and zipper, but more than enough for the porn magic to flood Tony’s nervous system, weakening every bone in his body and forcing a whimpering moan from his throat.

*Not a terrible idea.*

He tries to look like he’s in control as he stands at the bedside. Tries to convince himself he’s in control. Confident. Not staggeringly drunk. Not, in the back of his mind, wondering what the hell he’s thinking and asking why – *why* – he’s even considering doing what he wants to do with Loki.

From the bed, Loki smiles up at him. She pulls the finger that touched him back to her mouth and traces the outline of her lips before drawing it in with her tongue. Gently biting down.

“Right, that’s why,” Tony whispers to himself.

All she needs to do is hold up her hand in one inviting gesture, and Tony’s pulled forward like a fish on a hook. He sinks down onto the bed at her side, anticipating the rush of magic through his blood even before her fingertips brush his cheek.

This may just be a terrible idea.

ooo

There could be worse ways for Tony to wake up than with one hand tucked under his pillow and the other resting between Loki’s thighs. Objectively speaking. Subjectively speaking, as he blearily opens his eyes and the morning light hits him like a brick to the face, he’s pretty sure he’d rather be almost anywhere else. On the floor. Outside. In the desert. Back in Atlantic City. Even in a S.H.I.E.L.D. prison cell. If he were in a S.H.I.E.L.D. prison cell, he wouldn’t be this hung over.

If he were in a S.H.I.E.L.D. prison cell, he wouldn’t be lying next to the person he’s lying next to, buck-ass naked and spooned together with legs all crossed over and mixed up.
“Ohhhhhhh fuck.”

“Yes, that would be an adequate summary of last night’s events,” Loki lazily confirms.

Loki. Regular, same old Loki. Loki of the decidedly masculine voice and other physical attributes to go along with it.

Tony pulls his hand away. “Weren’t you a woman when I got into this bed?” he growls, rolling on to his back, which turns out to be a bad move. Everything in his stomach lurches at once in what feels like a coordinated bid for freedom, and he has to clench his jaw to keep it down. “I’m at least eighty percent sure you were a woman.”

“Only eighty?” snorts Loki. “How much do you recall?”

He grunts. Not much. And he’d like to keep it that way by not talking, since he has this bad feeling that any discussion will start to dredge up too many details from the recesses of his mind. Right now everything’s a vague blur of crying like a baby over Pepper before stumbling back to the motel, and then something about a Stark Expo shirt. That’s all he needs, and still more than he wants.

“You were quite intoxicated, Tony Stark, but still performed admirably despite yourself. It was certainly more enjoyable than Agent Barton’s utilitarian fumblings.”

And Tony’s stomach lurches again, this time for completely different reasons. “Oh Jesus Christ. You and Barton?!”

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Loki sits up and stretches his arms out wide. “Is that jealousy I detect?”


“One does what one must,” Loki says as he stands. “I must rebalance my magical energy from time to time. Some of those times involve less than ideal solutions.”

That statement, falling lightly from Loki’s mouth, doubles in weight when Tony replays it inside his head. One does what one must. It sounds innocently resilient at first. And then sounds... he doesn’t even know. But it makes something inside of him sink down low into his gut, dark and uneasy. “I should tell Barton you said that,” he says, trying to force a joke and a smile.

Loki may or may not be smiling with him. It’s hard to tell. Either way, he doesn’t respond. “I am going to shower. Are you well enough to travel?”

Travel where? Tony sits up, holding one hand against his forehead as he does, since that seems like the right thing to do to keep his brain from pounding its way out the front of his skull. “Lemme throw up in the parking lot a couple times and choke down a dozen Aspirin and I may be able to walk without dying. Why, where are we going?”

Again, no response. Just another curious maybe-smile before Loki disappears into the bathroom and shuts the door.

“Don’t use any of my shit!” Tony yells after him. And immediately regrets it as the words vibrate and echo and clang through his head. Gingerly, raises his other hand to his face and massages his temples. “Fffftuuuuu...”

There was this rhyme he learned once, back in college:
Beer before liquor, never sicker
Liquor before beer, you're in the clear

Last night he chased down a bottle of Jack with five cans of PBR, and that rhyme is a blatant lie. Nothing about the way he feels now could be classified as ‘in the clear’. He’d sort of been joking about throwing up in the parking lot before. Now it actually sounds like a good idea.

He fumbles and swears his way out of bed, sidestepping the used condom on the floor. He has no memory of putting that on (or taking it off), and the sight of it makes him cringe. Maybe more than cringe. It might make him want to tear his skin off to better crawl into a hole and die. But at least he can pat himself on the back for taking the time to make sure he didn’t accidentally get Loki pregnant, because seriously, having the ‘sorry I knocked up your brother’ conversation with Thor would be weird even beyond the weirdness that’s already gone down in the past couple days.

Yeah. Sorry I knocked up your brother, who was a woman at the time, after you specifically told me not to come back to the motel last night, because you probably knew exactly what would happen.

That’s what’s on Tony’s mind as he pulls on his pants, shuffles to the door, vomits over the rail into room 109’s parking space, and then downs a little hair of the dog from a bottle he chucked in the Superman snacks backpack: Thor. Specifically: what Thor knows about Loki’s magic.

Probably everything, or close to it. Thor has that advantage. After so many years of fighting, either with or against Loki, he probably knows all the workings of the magic. All the tricks. All the rules.

And that makes Tony want to punch him in the face, because the motherfucker knew. He knew. Of course he did. Why else would he take the key, if not to stop Tony from coming back to the room? He knew what Loki would do. Fuck, he’s known for days what Loki was planning to do. And yet he said nothing. All he divulged was some cryptic bullshit that Loki was up to something, and it involved Tony, and then the business about do not let him touch you...

If he has to decide who he hates more at the moment, Thor or Loki (hating himself is not a valid option, because that’s kind of an ongoing thing), he’d have to say Thor. The vagueness, dancing around the truth, and general screwing-over are things he’d expect from Loki. If Loki had been the one to take the key, if Loki had been the one to hint at something unsavory in the works, he’d have been all over that like white on rice, overanalyzing every little clue as to what was going on. But Thor... He trusted that bastard. He was stupid and careless enough to let himself believe that if he stuck with Thor, everything would somehow work out. He honestly thought Thor had all of their best interests at heart.

Guess again, sucker. Thor’s just in this for Asgard. He wants to find the Tesseract and take Loki back home, and only gives a rat’s ass about you as long as it’s convenient for him.

Well. Some lessons are better learned the hard way. Lesson one was ‘never trust Loki’. Obvious enough. Lesson two is ‘never trust Loki’s brother’.

Gingerly, Tony sits on the bed. No huffing, dramatic flops with the way his stomach and head feel. Then he closes his eyes and lies back, because his brain hurts too much to think and concentrate on remaining upright at the same time.

Trouble is, easy as it might be to shake his mental fist at Thor for last night’s big ball of failings and bad decisions, shifting the blame does nothing to take away any of the guilt. It’s not Thor’s fault Tony couldn’t say ‘no’ to Loki. Christ, it’s not even Loki’s fault. Thor was being Thor, Loki was being Loki. Tony was being Tony. And that’s the real problem, isn’t it? Tony Fuck-up
Stark. There’s the weakest link. The one who got drunk off his ass and forgot how to not act like a sex-crazed teenage spaz. He could’ve easily stayed in his own bed and gone to sleep. Or he could’ve walked back out that door the second he saw what Loki was up to. He could’ve left Loki the hell alone, and he could’ve got a second room to himself. He could’ve kept his distance from Loki from day one. Or, if he were really smart, he could’ve made a better effort to be a decent human being to Pepper all along. In which case he never would’ve found himself in this situation. Could’ve, could’ve, could’ve. All those possibilities, and yet he still chose to go down every single shady fork in the road leading to this moment. He chose. Not Thor. Not Loki. He did.

“Yep,” he says aloud to the water stain on the stippled ceiling. “Nobody’s fault but mine. Fuck balls.”

That articulate and heartfelt confession still does nothing to take the guilt away.

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Loki’s entire demeanor has changed by the time he emerges from the shower. It’s not that Tony would have described him as ‘laid back’ or ‘apathetic’ before, but compared to the Loki that comes out of the bathroom, Atlantic City Loki was downright easygoing. New Loki moves with purpose to pick out clothes from the Ninja Turtles backpack. No more lolling around in a towel. Once the base layer is on, plaid shorts and a Spinal Tap shirt, the illusion of a crisp charcoal gray suit settles gently into place with a glimmer of gold. A quick comb of hands through his hair is all it takes to transform damp curls into his signature spiked-out Aladdin Sane style.

He looks better overall – healthier – when he turns to Tony. Skin still milky pale, but no more waxy sallowness or sunken, shadowed eyes. No more clammy sheen. There’s even a tinge of color in his cheeks. But it’s his posture that says the most: the way he now moves and holds himself with a razor-sharp sense of confidence. He stands at the end of the bed like an emperor, fearsome and majestic even in the drab setting of a sleazy motel. The aura of power all but shines from his body. Slowly, he drops his head to one side, then the other, stretching his neck as if settling back into himself. A self that’s been too damaged and overwhelmed by magical aftermath to be seen these past few days.

His smile, when he pauses to spare a glance at Tony, is thin and cold. So this is the true Loki. Loki of Asgard. Loki of legend. Loki of powers and abilities and knowledge that Tony, for all his earthly genius, can’t even begin to comprehend. And for the first time, standing there in yellow morning light that filters through nicotine-stained drapes, this man looks like he could truly be a god.

For the first time, Tony feels real dread begin to trickle into his chest, chilling his blood.

Loki isn’t human. Of course he knew that before, in some abstract and artificial way. The same way somebody can know about the enormity of mountains but never fully understand until they’ve seen them in person. But whatever skeptical part of him had been holding back, subconsciously unwilling to believe in Loki’s otherworldly origins... that’s all gone. Tony understands now.

Loki isn’t human.

If Loki had spoken some godly proclamation, in that moment, Tony’s pretty sure he would’ve obeyed without question. Knelt, prayed, sacrificed a goat... hell, whatever he was asked. But all Loki says is, “How long will it take us to travel back to New York?”

Not what anybody was expecting. “Without teleportation?”
A dark look crosses Loki’s face. “No. Transporting both you and Thor all that distance would require a massive energy commitment, with all the resulting inconvenience. Doing such when I have no assurance of revival would be very foolish indeed.”

“Assurance of...?” Oh right. Tony coughs. “Yeah, that’s, um... huh. No way around that, is there?”

“Why? Are you offering to make yourself useful again, Tony Stark?”

“No,” he says, maybe a little too quickly. “You want me to be useful, I’ll steal a car. I’m very useful in that area of expertise... or at least I am in the safety of my own garage when I screw around for S ‘n’ Gs. But just so you know, you dumped us all the way in the opposite corner of the country. Driving back to New York, even if I teach both you and Thor how to drive and we boot it day and night taking shifts at the wheel and only stopping for gas, will still take over thirty hours. More realistically, three or four days. And trust me, a four-day road trip with the three of us crammed into one car will be hell.”

“I shall leave our travel arrangements in your capable hands,” says Loki, dismissively turning away to poke at the curiosity that is the TV remote on the dresser. “Choose whichever method you deem best.”

Tony rakes his hair back with a grumble. “How kind of you...” A choice between two thousand miles in a stolen vehicle with his favorite Martians, or whoring himself to the God of Assholes for a chance to unravel the laws of physics again. Long and aggravating versus quick and degrading. Damnit.

When he looks up, Loki’s smirking at him. “This wasn’t meant to be a difficult decision.”

“I wasn’t–” he begins as he rolls to the edge of the bed and sits upright, feet on the floor, but the rush of hot blood to his face shuts him up. Usually he’s good at this kind of thing. Maybe it’s the circumstances and the hangover and the aftermath of what happened last night, but shooting a snappy reply back at Loki right now is too draining. He doesn’t feel witty. He doesn’t feel sharp, or clever. Just tired and overwhelmed, like this whole conversation is a big waste of time and a way to pretend everything’s okay and skirt around the real issue when all he really wants to know is-

“Why did you do it?”

Shit. He didn’t mean to say that part out loud.

“’It?’” Loki asks, though Tony can tell he understands full well.

“You know what I mean. It. Everything. Everything since yesterday or... hell, even before. Why me, when you could’ve just waited? Why did you do it?”

And Loki throws the question back in his face. “Why did you?” Never a straight answer.

“Probably because I make bad decisions. It’s what I do. I fuck up my life and do stupid things I later regret.”

“Such as drink yourself into oblivion and fall into bed with any willing partner?”

What was that phrase he used talking to Thor last night? ‘Harsh but accurate’? Yeah. Only harsh always seems a little harsher when it’s pointed at him instead of somebody else. “At one point, yes, that was my daily routine.”
“Well,” says Loki, “that makes two of us. Though in my case, we shall replace the word ‘drink’ with ‘magic’. The result is essentially the same.”

“If it comes at such a high cost with all these dire consequences, why don’t you just stop using it?”

“Why don’t you just stop drinking?” Loki sneers, and Tony feels his jaw clench at the low blow. “I will tell you why: because the magic is as much a part of me as your destructive vices are a part of you. Physically a part of me, and it has been for as long as I can remember. Do you know what happens when I rid my body of magic?”

No, but the uncomfortable tingle at the base of Tony’s neck is telling him that he might not want to know. Nothing good has ever come from a question like that.

Loki holds his arms up in front of his face, the illusion-suit sleeves neatly folding themselves back. “This is a new trick. One I learned quite recently. It came in handy at the time, though I must say my Chitauri jailers found it less than enjoyable.”

The spread of blue begins in his hands, like a stain seeping through from the inside out. It flows up to his fingertips and down past his wrists, changing the color and texture of his skin from pale humanoid to something leathery like an animal hide. The ridges Tony saw briefly back on the beach rise up from nothing to form complex patterns of circles and lines, while crystals of frost glitter into being around lengthening, talon-like fingernails.

Despite the strangeness, despite the prickle of fear down his back, Tony leans forward. He can’t help it; curiosity outweighs apprehension, like staring at giant spiders at the zoo or watching youtube clips of things he knows will end badly. It’s one of those things he can’t not see. When else is he going to have a chance to have an up-close look at a blue-skinned alien? “Is this... what you look like in your Jotun form?”

Immediately, the color disappears and Loki drops his arms to his sides. “Where did you learn that word?” he snarls.

Oh. Maybe this is something he’s not supposed to know about. “Sorry. Thor told me.”

Wrong thing to say. A flat hardness clamps down over Loki’s eyes, and this time, he says nothing more. No more sly banter. His mouth becomes a thin line, white-lipped, and his expression cold.

“Look,” Tony tries, but a cutting glare from Loki silences that train of thought.

“I am weary of this idiotic conversation,” Loki says. Like he’s just remembered who he is, and who Tony is, and where they are... and that maybe he shouldn’t be saying the kinds of things he’s said. He let his godly guard down for one moment but it’s back up now, stronger and higher and more impenetrable than ever. “I will not be abandoning use of magic, but nor will I frivolously waste my powers at the whim of a mere mortal. The Tesseract can wait four days. Go find us a car.”

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After a brief reconnaissance tour around town, Tony figures their best bet for wheels is the white four-door Grand Am parked behind an insurance place. That has a nice sense of irony to it. He stops in at the hardware store down the street to buy a spool of fencing wire, a set of screwdrivers, and a drill, then it’s back to the motel. Back to Loki. Like a trained fucking poodle.

It’s a small consolation that, for the time being, he and Loki have a common goal: return to New York. If he has to be forced into the role of Loki’s new hired goon and dragged along on some
hare-brained adventure, at least it’s to somewhere he wants to go. What’ll happen once they get there is anyone’s guess, but he’ll worry about ominous future problems when the ominous future comes. Maybe four days in a Grand Am will convince Loki that Earth is a terrible, terrible place and he wants to leave immediately. (Okay, unlikely, but a guy can dream.)

Loki’s sitting on the dresser when Tony opens the door to room 108. Or to be more exact, Loki’s perched on the balls of his feet on top the dresser, next to the TV, leaning back against the wall with his eyes closed. Crushed, empty juice boxes litter the floor around him.

For some reason, despite everything else that’s gone down in the past three days, everything he’s seen from blue skin to teleportation to impromptu sex changes, this is what strikes Tony as really strange: Loki posed like a dresser-owl. After putting up with so much deep space crazy magic weird, plain old regular Earth-type weird is strikingly absurd in comparison. “You’re a creepy bastard, you know that?” he says, tossing the hardware bag onto the bed. He glares at Loki, who neither moves nor acknowledges his presence in any way. “I got some shit to steal a car, and picked out a shitty car to steal. We can leave whenever Thor gets back. Are you trying to contact him?”

“No,” says Loki. And that’s all. No explanation of what he is doing.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

“Well here’s a thought: if you want to get out of this place, maybe you should put some effort into locating our third team member. So why don’t you work on that. I’m going to shower.”

Loki opens his eyes. Smirks. “I was about to suggest you do so. You’re covered in dust and smell of numerous unpleasant things.”

There are a lot of ways Tony could reply, but none of them is exactly safe for a potentially violent owl god. Easier to just flip a certain finger over his shoulder on his way to the bathroom. He strips off his clothes and turns the shower on full blast, steaming hot. Maybe it can scald and scour away all the dried guilt still clinging to his skin.

(No, that’ll never come off, but it’s nice to get cleaned up all the same.)

He stands under the spray until the hot water starts to run out, washing his hair twice and scrubbing the cheap bar of hotel soap over every inch of his body more times than he wants to count. Feels a little better. What would feel a lot better is stepping out of the shower and being able to dry off with a towel Loki hasn’t already used, but there’s this phrase about beggars and choosers that keeps popping up in Tony’s mind lately.

Just four more days, he says silently to his reflection in the mirror as he pats himself dry with a damp towel. Maybe three. Three more days. I’ll be back in New York, have my suit, grab the damn fucking Tesseract, boot He-Man and Skeletor back to Eternia, and all this shit will be over.

The reflection staring back at him looks unconvinced. Wet, tired, scruffy, and unconvinced. Its red-rimmed eyes seem to say, You’ve spent three days with those jokers so far and are already precariously balanced on the brink of insanity. How the hell are you going to live through three more?

Because he has to. There’s no other choice. The fate of the world more or less hinges on his ability to put up with Loki and Thor until the two of them are safely off-planet.
...In which case, there’s a good chance the world is screwed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter-specific warnings for magical shapeshifting genderswap Loki and drunken Tony making some bad decisions with genderswap Loki in the first scene. Non-graphic, fade-to-black sex is implied. I've opted not to list this in the story tags because it doesn't really seem appropriate to tag for something that appears in only one scene of a long, multi-chapter story.
Thor does not approve of Loki’s actions. In related news, when it comes down to a fistfight between an Asgardian and a Frost Giant, nobody fights fair.

So this chapter contains a version of Loki that’s pretty different from the established fandom norm and may at this point seem contrary to MCU canon. I actually have totes legit reasons for doing this, and some of those reasons will be explored in chapter 12. Until then, don’t hate me because I’m different! :P

Additional chapter warnings for some Asgardian cultural homophobia and intolerance.

Tony’s spent the last three days begging the universe for a bit of luck. One lucky break. He’s used to lucky breaks: he’s Tony Goddamn Stark. Things are supposed to go his way. And right now, it’s not like he wants anything outrageous. Just one little favor. What he’s asking for as he pulls on his shorts and leaves the bathroom is for Thor to hurry up and get his ass back to the motel in a timely fashion. That’s all. Nothing fancy. He just needs Thor to show up, because the sooner Thor returns, the sooner they can be on the road, and the sooner they’ll be in New York.

The universe decides to grant his wish and kick him in the balls at the same time.

The door opens as he’s digging through the Ninja Turtles backpack for a clean shirt. It’s a shy and tentative action at first: not the usual bursting, grand entrance Tony’s come to associate with Thor. The door creaks open just enough for Thor’s head to peek through.

“Loki?”

Glancing around the room, Thor’s head stares at three things in a specific order. One: Loki, gracefully owl-perched on the dresser and no longer a jabbering, magic-addled lunatic. Two: Tony, wearing nothing but underwear while discarded items of yesterday’s clothing lie scattered on the floor. Three: one bed with linens all twisted up and kicked aside (second bed pristine and unused).

A very obvious conclusion can be drawn from this scenario.

Judging by the look on Thor’s face, that’s the conclusion he makes. He throws the door wide open with a shout, fulfilling expectations of that bursting, grand entrance. Only not in his usual congenial way. This time he looks furious, growling in a berserker Viking rage that makes Tony’s stomach plunge.

“Loki!” Thor bellows, and Loki doesn’t even have time to blink in reply as Thor grabs him by the neck and hauls him out to the parking lot.
Tony, who does have time to reply based on the fact that he’s not being dragged outside, yells a feeble, “Wait!” But to no avail. Thor’s already outside, throwing Loki down to the ground.

*Shit fuck shit fuck fuck shit balls!*

It’s like one of those dreams where everything happens in slow motion despite a desperate need to move forward. Tony hastily stuffs his feet into his shoes, no time for laces, and pulls on the first shirt he can grab off the floor. Loki’s Stark Expo shirt from last night. Inside-out. Whatever. He stumbles out the door and vaults over the railing just in time to see Loki, lying on his back as the golden illusion of his suit disintegrates, lash out with a scythe-like kick that knocks Thor off his feet. Thor falls to the ground with a furious cry but springs right back up again to raise his hammer above his head. He smashes it down onto the gravel, shattering pebbles into dust a fraction of a second after Loki rolls to the side with the agility of a cat. Loki retaliates with another well-placed kick to Thor’s knee.

“Stop it!” Tony shouts.

Maybe they hear. Maybe they don’t. In either case, they’re too busy fighting to pay Tony any attention. Loki rolls again as Thor reaches down to grab him, but isn’t quite quick enough; Thor’s hand finds his hair and drags him to his feet. Loki lashes out with one arm, fist connecting solidly with the side of Thor’s head, though he blow costs him any chance to escape. Thor hooks Loki’s arm and pins it underneath his own before releasing Loki’s hair and twisting him into some sort of headlock.

“Jesus fucking hell you assholes, stop fighting!”

Bound in Thor’s iron hold, Loki attacks in the only way he can: by kicking at Thor’s shins and biting his bare arm hard enough to draw blood. Thor only squeezes harder on Loki’s neck, choking him until he’s forced to release his bite just to struggle to breathe.

They’re not going to stop. Not now, and not because some puny mortal told them to. And so Tony tries the only thing he can think of that might get them to listen. “Somebody will see you, you dumb fucks!”

That, at least, grabs Thor’s attention. He snaps his gaze over to Tony, and after a brief moment of what looks like consideration, relaxes his stranglehold enough for Loki to gasp in a breath.

“Tony Stark is right,” Thor says, maybe to Loki. More likely to himself. “We cannot fight here.”

“Goddamn right you can’t fight here!” Tony spits back at him. “What the hell, Thor?!?”

“We will finish this away from the settlement.”

Tony only has time to shout out a horrified, if clichéd, “No!” before Thor thrusts his hammer into the air and flies off, carrying Loki along with him. He shoots up like a rocket on an arched trajectory, coming to land maybe a mile out in the desert beyond the edge of town.


At least by the time he finally reaches them, sweaty and panting for breath, they’re no longer trying to murder each other. The fight’s switched gears into a mere screaming match.

“You knew as well as I did!” Loki’s in the middle of shouting when Tony stumbles into earshot.
“It was the only way, and a risk I had to take, overextending my powers and leaving myself at your mercy! *I saved our lives, Thor!* Had I not done it, we would not be enjoying our freedom right now! Sometimes such actions are necessary for survival!”

“And allowing yourself to be unmanned because of it?!” Thor shoots back

Loki snarls at him. “Necessity! You know that, too!”

“You could have waited! One more day, and-”

“Waited for what?” Loki’s laugh is acid, burning through Thor’s words. “Waited for *your* approval? Waited to conduct myself in a way that you deem fit? I am sorry my actions so offend you, brother; that the whole of my wretched existence causes you so much grief! Perhaps I should live only to please you?!”

“No! You should live as befits a prince of Asgard!”

“Oh, but this *is* how I live as a prince of Asgard!” hisses Loki. “You are so blinded by your purified ideal of me that you fail to see what has been right in front of you all along! *This* is my life, Thor! This! Silence and secrecy and sacrifices you would never understand because your mind is so hatefully shuttered against them!”

“No!” Thor tries again. “All I want-”

But Loki’s on a roll and damned if he’ll let anyone stop a good rant. “All you want is for me to be more like *you*! That’s what you’ve always wanted! Is it not? A younger brother in whom you can take pride? A warrior. No shameful wielder of effeminate magic. And do you think I did not try? Do you think I did not fervently wish with every last thread of consciousness to be more like you? The favored son of Odin, beloved of the realm? And do you think I did not notice when none of this made the least bit of difference, because whenever I tried to act in such a way that would please you, you responded with naught but apathy?” He pauses to draw a breath as a bitter smile tugs at his mouth. “Yet now when I finally choose to act in a way that is pleasing to me, to follow my own desires rather than those of a kingdom of narrow-minded fools, you have the gall to claim such horrific outrage!”

Thor silences him with a one-handed shove, knocking Tony for a few staggering steps before he falls flat on his back in the dirt. “I said, this is of no concern to you! It is between me and my brother only!”

“Brother!” Loki laughs

As expected, Thor shakes off the touch with a snort. “Tony Stark, this is none of your concern! You have interfered enough already! Leave us!”

“Hey!” Panting hard and trying not to choke on a gritty mouthful of dust, Tony grabs Thor’s arm. Probably not a safe move given Thor’s state of mind, but for fuck’s sake, this nonsense has gone on long enough.

As expected, Thor shakes off the touch with a snort. “Tony Stark, this is none of your concern! You have interfered enough already! Leave us!”

“No, sorry, I like interfering and I’m not leaving. If I can just take a minute to explain you a couple things, because I have the strangest feeling you’re mad at Loki over what you think may have happened last night-”

Thor silences him with a one-handed shove, knocking Tony for a few staggering steps before he falls flat on his back in the dirt. “I said, this is of no concern to you! It is between me and my brother only!”

“Brother!” Loki laughs

With a cold glare, Thor stares him down. “Loki, our father sent me to bring you home to face the
laws of Asgard, and I will do as I am bidden. You are my brother, and you are the son of Odin, and you will answer for this dishonor you have brought to our family!”

“Oh I will?” asks Loki. “No, Thor, I think I have a better idea. I will renounce my title as Prince of Asgard. In fact, I will renounce all claims I might hold on Asgard at all! We both know how false and unsubstantiated those would now be, do we not? Thus I am part of your spotless family no longer. Do not trouble yourself to worry about me. How can I bring you shame when all ties are severed? I am not your brother, and I am not the son of Odin. You need not live in fear of how I might disgrace you next.”

Thor hefts up his hammer with a savage growl as he makes a menacing lunge toward Loki. “You will disgrace no-one, not even yourself, when you are properly imprisoned!”

“And if I refuse?”

“You think you can refuse me?” Thor snarls. “You think you can win this fight?”

Loki just smiles in reply, cocking his head to the side. “A fair fight?”

As a warning, Thor raises his hammer higher and bares his teeth.

“No, no, I like this idea,” says Loki. “A fair fight! I challenge you, Thor, officially, to fight me. If you win, I will calmly yield to whatever idiotic sense of justice you have in mind. But if I win, you will leave me in peace and stop this misguided quest to carry me home as your prisoner. If we return to Asgard, we do so as equals. Is that acceptable?”

Slowly, Thor’s arm falls to his side. “I may accept,” he says, face full of suspicion. “What terms?”

“No weapons.” Loki jerks his chin towards the hammer.

“Then no magic,” Thor retorts.

“Agreed. Physical strength only.”

“Agreed.”

“Arena?”

Thor looks around them, turning in a full circle before settling on a wide depression in the landscape some hundred feet away. He points. “There.”

Loki nods. “Fine.”

“Oh hell,” Tony grunts as the Asgardians start walking. Scrambling to his feet, he takes off after them, sprinting to catch up to Thor. Careful, though, to stay out of shoving distance. “Hey! Chuck Norris! What do you think you’re doing?”

“No. Nuh-uh. Bad idea. Remember? Remember what we talked about last night? Remember when I said you need to have a conversation with Loki? This isn’t a conversation. This is the opposite of a conversation. Stop now and work things out with your brain-muscle.”

“I’m sorry, Tony Stark, but Loki challenged me to an honorable duel. I cannot refuse.”
“Cannot or will not? This is stupid. Just stop for a second and-”

“No.” He pushes on ahead, taking advantage of his height and long legs to outpace Tony. “We must fight! It is the law.”

“Law of what? Oh for the love of...” Tony whips around, brain spinning through a million worst case scenarios that could possibly unfold. Injury. Death. Epic fucking god-battle that rends the desert in two or some other such mythological bullshit. Goddamn, he has to stop this. He falls back to jog alongside Loki. “Alright, so, I can’t even believe I’m trying to appeal to you to be the reasonable one, but you can’t go through with this.”

“Why not?” Loki asks, a hint of a smile breaking across his lips.

“Well, um, first the obvious answer: Thor will kill you or at least break your neck. Physical fight only? This is where he has the advantage. You’re not allowed to use magic. He will destroy you.”

“I need no magic to defeat him.”

Tony groans. “I love that you’re so optimistic, but if you stop to think carefully about-”

“I have thought,” says Loki, so calmly it sends chills across Tony’s skin. “I have thought this through very carefully. I need no magic to defeat Thor, Tony Stark. I need absolutely no magic at all.”

As Loki steps forward, Tony stays right where he is, paralyzed in place and heart dropping heavily down to his feet. No magic at all. He can’t possibly mean...

The ice comes first. Frozen little crystals gather around Loki’s feet, leaving silvery prints in his wake. Next is the color, a frigid blue shade blooming up through his skin as the magic dissipates. Then transformation.

Giants. The word blares in Tony’s mind. Thor said Frost Giants. They’d be called that for good reason. With every step he takes, Loki’s growing taller and broader. Corded, wiry muscles ripple under his icy skin, sharply defined by each movement. His shirt strains across widening shoulders until the sleeves split at the seams while his hair fades into wisps of smoke, replaced by ridges of reptilian bone set like a crown over his skull. It takes mere seconds for the full transformation. Loki continues to follow after Thor, not even pausing, not even slowing as his metamorphosis comes to completion.

Thor only turns around once they reach the designated arena. He spins with a furious sneer on his face, lifting his arms and clenching his hands into fists, ready to fight, but all of that crumbles into one look of horror when he sees what Loki has become. Nearly eight feet tall, skin leathery blue-gray and crisscross swirled with raised lines, crests of bone on his head and ice spreading from his feet in a frosted white starburst across the dirt. The sight’s enough to make Thor stumble backwards, almost falling. Disbelief widening his eyes.

“Loki!” he gasps. And that’s all he has time to say before Loki strikes him across the chest and sends him flying.

This one blow will set the stage for things to come. Tony can see that, cringing as Thor rolls to a stop on the dusty ground before scrambling to his feet. Already, Loki is charging in for another attack. Thor manages to dodge the first swing of Loki’s arm, but not the second, which knocks him flying again. Without that hammer as backup, he won’t do so well against Loki’s Jotun size and strength.
“No magic!” he shouts, dodging once more. “You agreed—”

“And so I rid myself of all magic,” Loki replies, lunging at, and missing, Thor’s shoulder. “How do you like my true form? The body into which I was born, free of the decoration of Asgard?” His voice has changed, too. Deeper. Rougher. Raspig and feral.

Thor’s answer is a retaliatory strike as he brings his fist down on Loki’s back. Hissing, Loki lashes out and catches him across the face with a fast backhand. Thor staggers but doesn’t fall, coming back quickly enough to land two punches, one after the other, to Loki’s stomach. Loki swings at him, clipping the side of his head, Thor charges forward in an attempt to tackle Loki, Loki grabs him by the hair and slams him down...

And this time, Tony’s pretty sure nothing he can say will be able to stop the fight, and he’s not stupid enough to try. All he can do is watch it unfold with a feeling sour nausea forming in his gut. Loki has the upper hand, swiping a kick at Thor on the ground, reaching down to stop him from escaping, raking his clawed fingers over Thor’s neck. Thor rolls to the side to swing his leg out at Loki, Loki tries to pin him down with a foot, Thor writhes his way free, Loki kicks at him, Thor dodges while landing his boot on Loki’s knee. On it goes, trading blow for blow, though Thor’s slowly losing ground. He grabs Loki’s arm, once, trying to wrestle him down, but quickly lets go and shakes his hands as if injured. He can’t maintain contact with Loki’s frozen skin. Can’t hold him, can’t stop him, can’t do anything but try to defend himself between quick strikes.

Without the extra weight of the hammer on his arm, Thor can neither balance nor find his rhythm, and Loki’s leaving him no room for error. Every miscalculated swing of a fist draws him one step closer to defeat as Loki pounces on the opportunity to land a punch of his own. No matter what Thor tries, he can’t seem to stay on his feet; each time he manages to raise his head, Loki knocks him back down. Until, finally, one well-aimed crack to the temple sends him reeling and he slumps to the ground.

“Do you yield, brother?” Loki snarls. He kicks Thor to roll him onto his back before planting a foot firmly on his chest.

Thor swipes at Loki’s leg, but his dizzy swing isn’t enough to earn him his freedom.

“Do you yield?!”

Thor’s defiant shout of rage breaks down into a pained groan as Loki leans forward to press more weight onto his ribs.

*Just give up already, asshole!* Tony silently screams at him. *Let Loki win for once! You can always fight him again later!*

But Thor’s the kind of guy who doesn’t give up. Doesn’t surrender, and doesn’t just let somebody else take all the glory of winning. Especially not when he can take all that glory for himself by way of one little cheat.

The hammer whistles through the air, passing by Tony’s right side almost too fast for the eye to follow. It meets Thor’s hand with a crack of thunder that shakes the ground. Loki jumps back, but his new and improved size has cost him his previous quick agility; Thor catches him with the hammer’s first swing and knocks him off his feet. He lands hard in the dirt and has time only to raise an arm to shield his face before lightning strikes.

So the tables turn again. Thor, hammer in hand, crackling with electricity, glares down at Loki with a look of raging hatred on his bloodied face. Unable to hide the injuries sustained from that
first hammer blow, Loki draws his knees up to his chest. The blue tint rapidly drains from his skin as he shrinks back down into his Asgardian body. But Thor is too far gone in his bloodlust for any show of pity. He looses another lightning bolt at Loki, pinning him to the ground.

“I should kill you now!” Thor shouts. “The Nine Realms would be better off without your cowardice and betrayal!”

Loki’s answer is a handful of pebbles hurled in Thor’s direction. They shoot like bullets toward him, and it’s only just in time that he raises his arms to block his face.

“Is that all your worthless magic can do?!”

No; lying injured has little impact on the potency of Loki’s spells. As soon as the taunt leaves Thor’s mouth the ground explodes under him, blasting him with another facefull of rock and dirt that shreds at his hair and skin. He shoots up into the air to escape it and sends a third lightning strike back down in exchange, but Loki’s wise to that move and easily blocks it with some kind of invisible energy shield.

And the fight begins again in earnest. Thor dives at Loki, landing with enough force to blast a crater in the earth. Loki teleports out of the way at the last second and whips around to assail Thor with a new cocktail of stones and ice. Thor swings his hammer, Loki jumps aside, swiping at him with a shadowy club that looks like it materializes in his hand and disappears just as quickly... It’s a tradeoff, attack and defend, defend and attack, each movement blending into the next with superhuman speed. Thor swings and ducks. Loki dodges and engulfs Thor in a cloud of smoke to blind him. Disoriented, Thor hurls his hammer like a boomerang, but Loki’s already teleported away. Behind Thor. With a sudden glint of silver in his hand, flashing its warning of danger in the late morning sun.

Then Loki’s arm is rising high above his head, the blade of the knife growing longer in a deadly curve. Thor spins to face him as he brings it down, reaching up and grasping his wrist. A momentary struggle: Loki’s arm comes down, but his body blocks the knife from Tony’s view and it’s impossible to see what’s happening.

Until the spray of bright red arches up through the air to land on the dirt in a spattered crescent.

It’s Loki though, not Thor, who staggers forward on weakened knees. Loki who drops his head and hunches his shoulders to curl protectively into himself. Loki who’s bleeding in little channels that trickle down his legs and drip from torn clothing.

Tony’s halfway there before he even realizes he’s running, the same old mantra pounding through his head. Shit. Shit. Shit! Punching and kicking and wrestling all have their place in friendly brotherhood battle royale, but now there’s a knife and blood and... so much blood, pooling at Loki’s feet... Thor has one arm around Loki, both supporting him and keeping him in a locked grip to prevent escape. But that must not be good enough, because in the next second Thor’s raising his hammer and bringing the butt of the handle down hard on the back of Loki’s head. Loki sags forward, unconscious, draped like a gory rag doll on Thor’s shoulder.

Shitshitshitohshit... “Thor! What-”

“Stay back, Tony Stark!” Thor warns, holding out his hammer and aiming it at Tony like a human might brandish a gun. “I am returning my brother to the custody of S.H.I.E.L.D.!”

It takes two steps to process Thor’s words. And another two to stumble to a halt, still fifteen feet away, when his stomach leaps up into his throat. All Tony can do is stupidly stand there, mouth
gaping, mind erratically whirring through a thousand thoughts without being able to articulate a single one of them. His mouth only picks up clumsy fragments. “But our... we had a... when we decided... No, fuck, you can’t go back! Everything we’ve accomplished! If you go back now they’ll—”

“Your S.H.I.E.L.D. is no threat to me. I have had dealings with them before.”

“Yeah but our plan to—”

“There is no more plan!” Raising his hammer above his head, he adjusts his grip and shifts its weight in his hand. “Our alliance is ended. I should never have trusted you. I will retrieve the Tesseract on my own. Loki will answer to your people for his involvement with the Chitauri, and then I will return him to Asgard to face his crimes before my father. I have no interest in delaying any further. Good bye, Tony Stark.”

“You’re just angry!” Tony shouts, and shit, he hates how desperate and shrill his voice sounds. “You’re angry at Loki, you’re not thinking straight, Jesus Christ, I don’t even know what you’re so mad about! Just tell me what’s wrong. Let’s talk this through, we can talk it through, and... If you take off now you’ll regret it later! You’ll regret it when you realize what you’ve done. You’re angry, you want to punish Loki, you want to hurt him... But one hour. Just give it one hour, calm down, think carefully... Please. Please, Thor, let’s go back to the motel and talk about this. Please.”

Thor’s last word before shooting off into the sky is a simple, guttural, “No.”

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It’s a long, slow trudge back to the motel. The door’s still hanging open, just like Tony left it, and all their stuff’s still scattered through the room. The remnants of an idiotic quest gone wrong. So that’s that.

It makes sense, on some level, for this to end the way it started: with Thor flying off carrying Loki in his arms. He’ll return to S.H.I.E.L.D., effectively undoing everything they’ve accomplished over the past few days, and Tony... well. Tony gets the dubious honor of choosing whether to continue dicking around and staying on the run until Fury finally catches him, or to turn himself in. And since both his reason for running and his leverage for staying out of prison just flew off into the wild blue yonder, he’s screwed either way.

So. Plan? Nothing. Not yet. No great ideas, other than just get out of Texas. He has his car thief kit, so might as well stick to stealing a car, but instead of heading to New York it would make more sense at this point to shoot over to Malibu. Just as easy for S.H.I.E.L.D. to arrest him there, where he can also get cleaned up and change into some decent clothes. Then they can haul his sorry ass back to the east coast (or wherever the secret lair is hiding at the moment). Maybe, if he’s lucky, he’ll get a chance to have a go at Thor for the inconvenient abandonment and other stupid actions.

And maybe, if he’s lucky, Loki will still be in one piece.

“Shit,” he mutters. He drops the backpack he’s been stuffing full of clothes and sits down hard on the edge of the bed. Romanoff said she wanted the Asgardians, both Loki and Thor, but if Tony has to make an educated guess he’s going to say Loki’s the more important of the two. Why? Well, she also said S.H.I.E.L.D.’s priorities had changed since the Brookhaven incident, and that’s probably due to the Chitauri that came through Thor’s ‘space hole’. In that case, Loki’s going to have a lot of explaining to do. Probably not willingly.
A sick feeling is starting to prickle its way up Tony’s spine and into his neck. Wanting to punch that smug asshole in the face is one thing. Torture? The thought alone is enough to make him want to vomit for the second time today. It was hard to stomach when Loki was just the random villain of the week. Now Loki’s the guy who saved Tony’s hide when S.H.I.E.L.D. came calling in Atlantic City. The guy who offered to help with the plan to steal the Tesseract back. The guy who’s been wearing Tony’s old, ill-fitting clothes for three days, who refuses to consume anything that doesn’t come out of a juice box, and who smells like coconut shampoo. The guy (and girl?) who... yeah. All that.

“Shit!” Again.

He doesn’t have time to drive to Malibu, get himself arrested, and fly back east. Who the hell knows what they’d do to Loki by then, now that tangible proof of an alien invasion exists in the form of seven Chitauri corpses. Not that Tony can really do anything to stop them, but son of a bitch, he has to try. He has to talk to Loki. Convince him to drop all the Dr. Evil shenanigans. It probably won’t work and his efforts will likely get him nowhere, but he’ll be damned if he doesn’t at least put up a fight.

Leaning over to reach the nightstand, he picks up the phone and dials the one number he knows without a doubt S.H.I.E.L.D. will be monitoring.

Voicemail kicks in after four rings. Hello, you’ve reached the personal mobile phone of Pepper Potts. I’m unavailable to take your call right now, but please leave your name, number and a detailed message and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you.

Always perfect and professional, even on a phone she only ever uses to call her mom. “Hey,” Tony says after the beep. “Pepper, I apologize in advance, and you’re going to want to delete this message because I’m only calling for Agent Coulson. Also please don’t freak out about anything I’m about to say. I swear it all makes sense and I’ll tell you the whole story sometime. Yeah. Just delete it now. And Phil, I know you’re listening. It’s Tony Stark. I need to talk to you. I’m in room 108 at the Kozy Kloud Motel in a town in Texas that I think is called Serviceberry, which is... Yeah, your guess is as good as mine. Somewhere near the New Mexico border. East, maybe.”

He pauses to clear his throat. “Anyway. Thor’s on his way back to you, bringing Loki along with him. But I, uh, have some information about the Asgardians that you need. Pretty important. I don’t want to say over the phone because...” It’s a blatant lie. “Security. You know. Just make sure you don’t do anything with them until I’ve had a chance to talk to you. This is big. Get here quick. I’ll explain everything then. And sorry about yesterday,” he tacks on for good measure. “So sorry.”

Replacing the phone in its cradle, he wipes back the sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. Okay. One thing done. Coulson will get the message. Coulson has to get the message. Doesn’t S.H.I.E.L.D. have Clone Troopers stationed all over the country, ready to jump at the first hint of Tony Stark doing something? Sure they do. Yeah. They must. Somebody’ll be here with a helicopter or jet within the hour. Guaranteed. Tony just has to sit and wait, even though waiting feels like a rat gnawing away at his innards. A frenzied rat made of pure anxiety and-

“Tony Stark.”

He whips around at the sound of that voice. Loki’s standing in the doorway. Loki, dirty and bruised, dressed in shredded clothes and covered with blood. There’s blood drying down the side of his face, blood matted in his hair, spattered on his arms, smeared on his hands and – fucking hell – dripping onto the floor from the huge gash down the side of his chest. Grimacing in obvious
pain, he slumps against the wall and closes his eyes. Both hands rise up to cover the wound, but it does nothing to stop the pulse of never-ending blood.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony whispers. “What...”

“Thor is on his way back,” Loki says through clenched teeth.

“You mean you guys sorted things out? Or...?” He shakes his head. “No, never mind Thor, you look... You need to sit down. Hang on. Lemme grab the towel.”

He’s in the bathroom in four long strides, snatching the damp towel off the counter. It’s far from sterile, but it’ll have to do.

“I have no time to sit. I slipped Thor’s grasp to shift back here, but-” Loki pauses to hiss in a breath as Tony presses the towel against the ruin of torn fabric and skin on his chest. He takes hold of it, awkwardly, and immediately the white edges begin to flower crimson. “Thor will be here momentarily,” he continues through ragged gasps. “Choose, Tony Stark.”

Tony’s hands are shaking, but he doesn’t dare let go. Already the towel is soaked with red, and the sound of Loki’s labored breathing is enough to tell him that the situation’s worse than Loki lets on. “Choose... wait, what?”

“You may come with me. Or stay and wait for Thor.”

And at that, Tony laughs. He’s not sure why. This isn’t funny, not by a long shot, but the nervous laughter just claws its way out from his throat to accompany the stupid, terrified grin he knows he’s wearing. “Uh... You’re asking me to...”

“Choose,” Loki pushes. “I need to go. And I will take you with me if you wish, or I will leave you here, but I must know. Now!”

It’s with a feeling of surreal lightheadedness that Tony glances up to actually look Loki in the eye. What he sees is hard to read, but it might, for once, be sincerity. Or at least a lack of lies. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“And you... want me to come?”

Loki averts his eyes, just the slightest bit, to stare at the wall somewhere past Tony’s shoulder. “If you...” He pauses to bite his lip. Maybe in pain. Maybe not. Hard to tell. “If you will it. You may come with me.”

Not really an answer. But slowly, Tony nods. “Well,” he says. “In that case I think you’d better take me along. Because what I’ve seen so far with you dumping us in this place? You’re a terrible navigator.”
Pathetic Human Expectations

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark hates four things: post-apocalyptic wastelands, spiders, blood magic, and Asgardian psycho gods.

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is long. Okay, maybe just a little longer than usual, but things kept happening and I wanted to keep it all together. So thank you for putting up with my inability to edit and continuing to read this story. :)

Puente Antiguo – what’s left of it – is nothing more than a burned-out shell of a ghost town. Blackened skeletons of vehicles haphazardly litter a street slashed through with lines of churned earth and fractured concrete, while fire-gutted buildings crumble and collapse on the sidelines. The sign stating the town’s population of 2175 is a lie, just like the dirty, faded ads for ‘tire rotation’ and ‘daily special’. Nobody’s lived here in over a year. There’s no hint of life, apart from the occasional bird and a few ambitious spiders spinning webs in empty window frames. The crunch of Tony’s footsteps on grit and debris slices through static silence.

He stops when he finds the first building he’s looking for. The convenience store’s automated door is bent off its track and jammed with gravel, and Tony can’t open it, but he can squeeze through the gap and force his way inside. The interior of the building, with dirt-caked windows and no electricity, is almost too dark to see anything. He pauses a moment to let his eyes adjust before stepping over a collapsed candy display and heading for the bank of refrigerators along the back wall.

Everything is still fully stocked with rancid milk, moldy cheese, and other perishables long since gone bad. But bottles of water and soda stand in perfect condition, warm but undisturbed behind clear plastic doors. Tony loads up an armful of water bottles and sugary juice. Loki should like that, even if it doesn’t come in a box. After dumping it all on the counter, he surveys the rest of the store. Everything in flimsy packaging looks like it’s been ripped apart by animals. Chip bags and cereal boxes lie shredded on the floor. Chewed-up candy wrappers with them. The few canned goods, though, are untouched: beans, corn, ravioli, peaches. Tony grabs another armful of those, along with the one intact bag of Fritos on the top shelf.

He’s always hated movies about horrific disasters, wars, and other cataclysmic events that turn the Earth into some post-apocalyptic wasteland. All the stupid bullshit about trying to survive after the breakdown of society, digging through the remnants of cities for food and weapons, struggling minute by minute just to stay alive... He always figured he’d rather kill himself than be forced to scavenge like a rat for the rest of his life. He thought so before Afghanistan. He knows so now, having lived through that temporary hell.

Because this classic trope of scrounging for supplies while his badly injured buddy slowly dies of
something that could be easily fixed if only they had access to everyday twenty-first century medical help? It fucking sucks in real life.

ooo

A heavy sense of foreboding hangs in the air when he approaches the hotel: that uncomfortable little knot in his stomach twisting up once again to tell him something’s wrong. Carefully, Tony kicks aside bits of ruined masonry and shattered glass. The lobby had probably once been homely and quaint. Now half the front wall’s been blasted away and everything inside is dirty and broken, from the sooty carpet up to the lighting fixtures hanging by a single wire. And while the second floor’s been reduced to rubble, a few usable rooms remain in the back on the main floor where damage was minimized. Dingy and stale-smelling, but otherwise fine.

He pushes open the door to room 3, holding his breath against the sickly metallic smell, and drops his load of plastic bags. “Loki?”

Loki’s exactly where Tony left him on the bed. Stolen motel towel still stuck to the mess of blood on his chest. The towel’s soaked through, shiny and dripping with deep red, while Loki lies in a glistening puddle of more blood than could possibly have come from one person. It’s pooled on the mattress and running over the sides onto the carpet, where it spreads in thick rivulets. Against all that blood, dark in the shadows of the room, Loki’s face is chalk white. Lips no more than a trace of gray. The knot in Tony’s stomach tightens, twisting and churning as a finger of nausea worms its way up his throat and panic squeezes his shoulders. He steps around the splashes of red on the floor and grabs Loki’s arm. “Hey!”

Loki’s eyes blink open. Tony drops his head, exhaling loudly. “Shit. Fuck! For a second I thought...”

“I am not going to die,” Loki murmurs, scarcely moving his mouth. “It takes much more than this to kill a god.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t really blame me for jumping to conclusions based on my pathetic human expectations, can you?” Tony asks, feeling a spark of relief when Loki reacts with what could be interpreted as a smile. “Usually when there’s this much blood, death is involved.”

“I can regenerate it.”

“Blood?”

“Mm.” Loki inclines his head in what’s probably supposed to be a nod, though he doesn’t finish the gesture. “In fact... that is all I can do. It seems I have outsmarted myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was my knife. I called up a jagged-edged knife with dark magic. Blood magic. And I wove enchantments through the blade to slow the body and hinder magical healing. But Thor tried to take the knife, and in the struggle... You see what happened. Blood magic is a dangerous ally. Tony Stark. Always destructive. It likes to turn on its wielder when not shown the proper respect and care. I was arrogant and foolish and this is the result: savaged by my own spellwork, which is now not content to merely hinder magical healing, but is set on preventing it altogether. Everything I try seems to make matters worse. So... now I must lie here and regenerate blood until the wound heals naturally.”

“Okay,” says Tony, trying not to think about what that means or what it actually involves. Or how
much more blood could possibly pool on the bed. “Right. Yeah, you just regenerate away. You’re doing great. I’ll help you with that by... uh... not panicking... and also I found some medical supplies. Not real medical supplies because what I think used to be a doctor’s office is now a pile of cinder blocks, but the animal clinic was still standing. I got you some Vetrap and dog morphine.”

“I’m fine as I am.”

“No, you’re not.” Nothing about this situation can be qualified as ‘fine’, and it’s giving Tony an epic level of anxiety. “You’ve bled out enough for at least three whole people in the last hour. Maybe you’re good with that because you’re a crazy space alien, but I’m not, and I feel like it’s my duty to tell you that I’m really close to having a nervous breakdown. Between the teleportation and you turning into a Frost Giant and all the blood... I’d really be grateful if things could return to normal. And by ‘normal’ I mean ‘anything at a level of insanity less than what we have now’. The cuddling, lack of pants, and magical sexual harassment? Now that I know what the alternatives are, I’m totally okay with all that stuff. I fondly recall the days when the craziest shit I had to deal with was you and Thor not knowing personal boundaries. Feel free to go back there any time. But at the moment, to help me cope, if you’ll just let me patch you up in a conventional Earth way so I can pretend everything’s under control...”

Loki laughs. Or he tries to laugh. Laughing requires too much movement of the chest muscles, which makes him grimace and hiss in pain. But he slowly sits up nonetheless, sloshing in his puddle of gore, and nods to Tony. “Perhaps... If you insist. I’ve tried everything else, so you might as well.”

“Damn right I might as well. I like fixing things. It makes me feel better.”

First things first: Loki’s shredded shirt has to come off. Tony probably should have thought to grab a pair of scissors from the clinic, but at least the fabric’s ripped up enough that tearing it the rest of the way doesn’t take too much effort. The grim sight of what’s underneath will be more of a problem. Tony bites down on his tongue to keep from saying anything he doesn’t want admit out loud. Instead, swallowing the dry lump in his throat, he grabs his bag of vet supplies and pulls out a squeeze bottle of saline and a packet of disposable towels.

“Lets, um, clean you up. It’s probably... probably not so bad once we get some of the blood off.”

Only trouble is, the blood just keeps coming. Tony can get the surrounding skin wiped off to some degree, but the wound keeps bleeding all over his handiwork. After ten minutes, all he can do is turn a big torn-up mess into a slightly contained torn-up mess. That’ll have to be good enough. He gives everything one last wash with saline before applying a layer of gauze padding and binding it all up with the Vetrap.

“They had different colors,” he says to Loki as he starts on the first roll. “But I thought you might like black and green better than purple and orange.” Alright, so it’s lime green, and the way it wraps in with the black might make Loki look like an 80s new wave pop idol in a skin-tight one-shoulder tank top, but at least it seems to be holding everything together. Tony leans back to admire a job well done, flashing Loki a lopsided smile. “There you go. Feel okay?”

“Yes,” Loki murmurs. Then, very quietly, “Thank you, Tony Stark.”

Immediately, Tony looks down at his hands. The God of Assholes actually thanking him, and thanking him without a hint of irony or sarcasm, ranks right up there with ‘things too weird to deal with at the moment’. “Right, well... I’m kind of batting a thousand with saving your life, huh? No need to stop now.”
“Hm,” says Loki, though it’s not quite a full sound, but half a sigh.

“Can you stand? I think we should switch rooms. You shouldn’t sleep here tonight. Not in all this... yeah, no. Are you okay to walk?”

“You worry too much,” Loki replies as he pulls himself up to his feet. It’s a slow movement, and hesitantly careful, and Tony can see in his tightening shoulders just how much it hurts. But he does it just the same. “I told you, I am not about to die. Not today, and not in the foreseeable future. I am not as fragile as you seem to think me.” As if to prove a point, he punches a hole through the wall’s wood paneling and shoots a sly grin over his shoulder before walking out the door.

“Gotcha,” Tony mutters under his breath. Because really, when a guy can stick his fist through a slab of pine like it’s tissue paper, the best thing to do is probably just go along with whatever he says.

Loki settles down onto the bed in room 4, kicking up a year’s worth of dust from the bedspread and the smell of mildew from within the mattress. He’s no longer bleeding everywhere, so that’s an improvement. The Vetrap seems to be working at holding everything together. At least for now. Tony hauls over all the bags and backpacks of supplies and grabs out a water bottle. “You want a juice? I picked up some of your favorite: empty carbs and citric acid.”

“No. Not at the moment.”

“Are you sure? What about water?”

“No.”

“Anything? Canned peaches? Dog morphine? I have this feeling you might need to keep up your strength, and I have some-”

“Tony Stark,” Loki growls. “I told you already you need not worry about me. So please shut up and let me sleep before my hands decide to keep up their strength around your neck.”

“Hey now, no need to be mean,” says Tony, trying to sound hurt despite the smile doing its best to break across his face. If Loki has energy to expend on threats and acting like his same old dickish self, that can only be a good sign. “Just lemme know, okay?”

The only response from Loki is an annoyed grunt as he fluffs up his faded pillow.

Leaving Loki to his rest, Tony cracks the water bottle and throws back a swig. If only it were something a little stronger... He pokes his head into the bathroom, taking in the sights of an empty, rust-ringed toilet bowl and a desiccated mouse corpse in the tub. An unnervingly large and new-looking spider web floats between the cracked light fixture and the shower curtain rod. No sign of the spider. Better just close the bathroom door right now. Outside the window sits a planter full of weeds and the shreveled stalks of what might have once been flowers; out in the hallway is a pile of rubble and a partially collapsed ceiling that blocks the way to what Tony guesses must be the mostly collapsed kitchen. And that concludes the grand tour of the Puente Antiguo Hotel.

“Tony Stark?”

He probably turns around a little too quickly. “You decided you want the dog morphine?”

Loki stares at him with what can only be described as fraying tolerance. “No,” he finally says. “I want you to try very hard to be silent, because I am in a terrible mood right now and if I have to listen your voice blaring in my ear for much longer, I will tear your tongue out.”
“Right,” says Tony. “I can, um-”

“Perhaps later I will ask you to explain to me exactly why the word ‘silent’ is so conspicuously absent from your otherwise extensive and obstreperous vocabulary, but for now I want you to shut your mouth. Then, once you have accomplished this stunning feat, come over here and sit down.”

He almost says ‘right’ again. Almost. He gets as far as sucking in a mouthful of air before the scorching look from Loki cuts him right off. There’s still blood smeared down the side of Loki’s face, and he looks dangerous. It’s probably safer if Tony shuts his mouth and sits in the worn-out armchair next to the bed without any back-sass.

“Now isn’t that better?” Loki asks with a smile. “You listen to what I say, and we’ll have no problems.”

Define ‘no problems’, thinks Tony. But he smiles in return just the same.

“Don’t give me that stupid look.”

“What do you mean, ‘stupid’-”

Loki holds up one finger in warning. Tony shuts his trap.

“I only need you to hold out your hand.”

He remembers, this time, that rule about not touching Loki under any circumstances ever, and crosses his arms to tuck his hands safely away. Nope. Not going to happen.

“The accumulation of inert magic is hardly at a level that would affect you,” Loki sighs, like he’s reading Tony’s mind. “Difficult as this may be to believe, I’m not exactly interested in any sort of dalliance at the moment, owing to a need to continuously regenerate all of my blood. Taking my hand now will be no worse than touching my skin when you applied the bandage.”

The Vetrap. That’s right. He did touch Loki, without even thinking, while patching him up. If there was any trace of magic in Loki’s skin at that point, it was faint enough to go unnoticed.

“It will, however,” continues Loki, “provide me with enough energy to ensure the inert magic levels remain low. At this point, any contact at all will help. The transfer from your hand should be sufficient to balance out whatever I expend on regeneration. I want to keep my powers as stable as possible for now, as I’m sure we’ll have need of them in the near future.”

Okay, so that makes sense. (Sense! Right.) Tony might not like it, and when he woke up this morning he sure didn’t anticipate he’d be spending his afternoon sitting in the ruins of a small-town hotel holding hands with a Norse god, but then again he also didn’t anticipate being teleported across state lines to take up the role of combat medic after Operation Desert Thunderstorm. Sometimes days just don’t turn out the way you expect.

And sometimes your whole life takes a turn for the indescribably weird. I’m probably going to regret this, he thinks as he unfolds his arms and offers his hand. Loki, giving him an indulgent smile like he’s praising a reluctant child, reaches out to take it. Tony flinches at the contact, bracing for the worst, but only a tiny prickle of magic, like a static spark, jumps from Loki’s skin to his. Just a tingle. Just a flutter.

Just enough to make him think, for one moment, that Loki’s hand is surprisingly soft.

He sinks farther down into his chair and looks away. On second thought, I’m definitely going to
It’s the sound of wind that pulls Tony out of his sleep. He blinks his eyes open in the darkness of a strange room, shapes and shadows of unfamiliar furniture illuminated a dull, eerie blue in the faint glow of the arc reactor. No light coming through the window at his side; just his own ghostly reflection in the glass. As he blinks again and rubs his face, giving his head a shake, sleep-displaced memories from the past few hours begin to shuffle back to the front of his mind. Puente Antiguo. The hotel. Loki...

Loki’s still asleep, hand hanging limp over the edge of the bed. Must’ve slipped Tony’s grasp when they nodded off. If Tony reaches down he can just brush his fingertips against Loki’s skin. Still buzzing with a low level of magic. So still stable.

Yawning, Tony stands and stretches. His head throbs with a dull ache, his legs are stiff, and his knotted shoulder muscles twinge with every little movement. Fuck, his whole body hurts, and dozing off sitting in that chair with his chin drooping down to his chest sure didn’t help. He paces a few steps back and forth to loosen up, staring out the window. Not much to see out there. Moon obscured by clouds and no power for the street lights. All he can make out is the silhouette of a building across the street, its shape a slightly darker shade against the charcoal sky. Maybe the remnants of a flag or banner along the roofline, whipping in the wind.

As he stares, lightning flashes overhead, followed by a long roll of thunder.

Loki sits bolt upright in the bed at the sound.

“Looks like we’re in for a storm tonight,” says Tony.

“No, we’re not,” Loki growls. “Stay away from the window! And cover your light!”

Any grogginess still lingering in Tony’s brain disintegrates as the meaning behind Loki’s words sinks in. Shit. Right. Turning his back to the window, he covers the arc reactor’s pale glow with one hand. “How’d he find us?”

“Lucky guess?” Loki irritably replies. He climbs out of bed, but not easily, keeping his shoulders hunched low. The process of standing up draws a hiss and a groan through his tightly clenched jaw. “If he took the time to think things through rationally, he would come to the conclusion that, in my weakened state, I’d shift to the site of least resistance. Here.”

“Wait, you knew he’d-”

“I was hoping it would take him longer to figure it out! Long enough, at least, for me to heal this wretched injury and shift somewhere else.”

“Okay,” says Tony. “So at the moment, on a scale of one to ten, your level of healing would be...?”

“What do you think?!” Loki snaps.

Right. Negative one-point-fuck-you it is.

Loki’s movements are stilted, awkward, as he stoops to gather up all the bags Tony dumped by the door. Blood has seeped through the Vetrap. In the dark of the room, green stripes are indistinguishable from black down his left side. The bandage didn’t help; it was no more than a
temporary patch over a problem too big to contain. Loki’s still bleeding out as fast as ever, and when he winces to lift the bag of water bottles...

Sometimes, Tony has moments of clarity. Sometimes, things just click into place and he knows – he knows – he’s on the wrong track. Not that it’s always immediately evident what the right track is, but hopelessly wrong? Yeah. He can spot that. And this wrong track is crooked as hell, leading in a downward spiral so steep he’d need to hire Sherpa guides to lead him back up.

“Loki,” he says quietly. “Maybe we should...” No, he can’t bring himself to use the words ‘give up’. Giving up is not something that comes naturally to Tony Stark. “Maybe we should think about trying to cut a deal with S.H.I.E.L.D. and Fury.”

Loki’s head whips up to fix him with what Tony can tell is a look of disgust, even if he can’t really see it in the darkness.

“Hey, listen. We can keep running away, but realistically for how much longer? Unless we want to assume false identities and live out the rest of our lives south of the border, eventually they’ll catch us. This isn’t just a couple guys on our tail. This is a highly powerful, resourceful organization full of spies and assassins, and now your brother. Who’s found us. We’ll never be able to make them go away or fight our way free. Sooner or later, we’ll need to face facts and make a stand. Do you really want to keep dragging it out to the miserable end?”

“Yes,” Loki snarls.

“Well I don’t. My Spanish is limited to a few specific phrases like ‘another drink please’ and ‘where am I’ and ‘I need a bus ticket back to Mérida immediately’. Also once I think I accidentally told a very pretty girl I had thirty-seven anuses. Anyway, digression aside, I’m tired. I’m stressed. You’re injured – badly – and for fuck’s sake you don’t even have any shoes. Collectively, we’re a disaster. What are we even doing?”

“We are working to reclaim the Tesseract.”

“For what purpose? Still bent on taking over the world?”

No answer comes from Loki. Which can only mean one thing.

“I’m serious, just please listen for a minute,” Tony tries, dropping his voice. Loki’s not looking at him, but he pushes on nonetheless. “It’s not too late to back up and do the right thing. We can make a deal with S.H.I.E.L.D., I know we can. They’re not exactly the most morally righteous people in the world, so you swap sides and agree to work for them? They’ll let you. You can walk away, no prison, no punishment, but only if you cooperate while you still have a couple valuable cards in your hand. Right now? You’re in a prime position to do just that. You’re the only one who really gets how to use the Tesseract, and the only one who knows about these Chitauri guys and what their play is. That information will be very, very valuable. But only for a limited time.”

“For a limited...” Loki mutters, followed by a huffing breath. He says nothing else. But he’s thinking. Yeah, he’s thinking. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like he’s literally weighing his options, he bites down on his lower lip.

“Loki. Come on. We can do this. I promise. I swear to... whatever you want me to swear on, this can end in our favor. You just need to listen to me.”

Loki drops the bags. Lets them fall to the floor, canned food and bottles of drinks clattering around his feet and rolling away. The look on his face as he stares at Tony might be unreadable, but his
posture, his resigned stance, the way he raises his arm and holds out his hand in a gesture of solidarity...

"Good," Tony sighs. "This is good. Now let's just go out there, and you let me talk to Thor, and I think I can convince him we're ready to cooperate. We can do this. It'll work out. It'll all be okay. Let's go." He takes Loki's hand.

And Loki says, "No."

"Wait, what do you mean, 'no'?"

"I have a different destination in mind."

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They land in the desert with all the fluid grace of a car crash, Tony tripping over his feet and faceplanting while Loki topples into some kind of stop, drop and roll maneuver beside him. Smooth. He pushes himself up onto his hands and knees, both scraped and stinging, to look around. On his left, Loki lets out a shout of frustration and smacks the ground with his fist.

"Where are... Oh." Tony's heart sinks. That ridge... he recognizes it, and the patch of flat rock at its base, and that gnarled little bush.

"Back where we started," says Loki. Smacking the ground again, he grunts as he pulls himself up.

Yeah. Back where they landed when they first teleported away from the motel: a couple miles out of Puente Antiguo. "Did you mean to bring us-"

Based on the corrosive glare Loki shoots him, finishing that thought is probably a stupid idea.

"Right," he says instead. "Let me rephrase. Why did we end up back here?"

"Why does water flow downhill?!" snarls Loki.

Well, that would be due to gravity, but he's has a feeling Loki meant what he said as a rhetorical question.

"Honestly, Tony Stark, if you knew the first thing about magic..." He doesn’t go any further. And Tony doesn’t stir the pot by pointing out that Loki hasn’t exactly taken the time to teach him anything about magic apart from a few accidental lessons in energy transfer and power-drunkenness.

"No. I know precisely jack shit about magic, which is why this is all on you, pal. Your time to shine. I'm just here to keep it real."

"Oh, shut up..." Loki mutters, shaking his head in disgust. He roughly grabs Tony's arm and pulls him into... wherever it is they go when they circumnavigate the limitations of known science.

This time, it feels like Tony’s literally kicked out of particle form. Like something slams him from behind (and in front), knocking him sideways (except it’s more like outways) back to reality. He’s squeezed into the shape of his body and cracks heads with Loki as the two of them land in the dirt. A whopping five feet from where they started.

Loki mutters something unintelligible under his breath, but Tony can recognize the sound of swearing when he hears it.
“If I can ask you something—” Tony starts, but Loki cuts him off with a snarl and grabs his arm again. A fraction of a second later, they’re falling out of thin air and onto a pile of thick debris in the hotel lobby. The landings are getting worse. Loki’s elbow sinks into Tony’s gut as they collapse in a heap, knocking him breathless and bringing tears to his eyes.

“Time out!” he groans between coughs and struggling gasps for breath. “Just a sec, I need to...”

“I can’t, Tony Stark.”

“Can’t wait? Yes you can, seriously, just a minute... just a minute so I can... catch my breath...”

“I can’t shift away from this place.”

“Yes you—” He catches himself mid-thought once he realizes what Loki said. “...Oh. You... What?” Looking up, he can see that Loki’s lying on his back, hands clutched over his bandages, face gray-white and slick with sweat. Entire body tense and shivering.

“It’s too much,” Loki says. Or groans. “I haven’t enough strength to push past the barrier of this place. It’s so hard, to go somewhere new... It’s so hard. So much energy. I can’t... I can’t spare enough to overcome the pull of the Bifrost site. The regeneration is too...”

“At least you tried?” Tony offers. If he rolls onto his side, he can just reach out across the rubble to clasp his hand around Loki’s arm. The residue of magic coils over his skin, already noticeably stronger than it was only hours earlier. “It was worth a shot, but...”

“I will not surrender, Tony Stark.”

“But if you can’t—”

Loki slowly rises, pushing himself up into a sitting position with his arms and taking in a few stabilizing breaths before staggering to his feet. “I will not surrender. We can walk. I may not be able to shift, but I can still cloud us with invisibility.”

“You want to walk through the desert again?” Tony asks as he climbs up off the rubble heap. He’s not sure at exactly which point during the adventure the prospect of turning invisible became less noteworthy than a proposal to walk across New Mexico, but right now that sounds like the normal part of Loki’s plan.

“How far is it to the next town?”

“No idea. Hours, probably, and that’s assuming we accidentally start walking in exactly the right direction.”

“We need only put enough distance between us and the Bifrost site,” Loki says with a frown. “Once we are far enough, I should be able to shift us away.”

“And if you can’t?” asks Tony. “If we end up right back here again?”

If ever there was a moment when Loki looked like he was second-guessing himself, this would be it.

Tony gives him one decisive nod. “How about this. Can you spare enough magic to keep a car both invisible and silent? If so, I have a highly predictable plan.”

Nodding in return, Loki gestures for him to take the lead. “Is your plan to steal a car?”
“Hey, what did I just say? Highly predictable? Yeah. But the twist is, I’m not going to steal a car, per se. When I was out earlier I saw this Durango that had been abandoned in the street. Still in one piece and keys inside. I’d be more like… recycling a car. Follow me.”

ooo

The street outside the hotel is choked with fog and blowing dirt. Overhead, lighting continues to flash and illuminate the sky like a searchlight. A big, vindictive, Asgardian searchlight. Thor’s up there somewhere, on the lookout. Thunder rumbles. An uneasy prickle rolls down Tony’s spine as his heart picks up speed.

“You sure we’re invisible?” he murmurs to Loki. "I don’t feel invisible right now. Actually I feel very exposed. Kind of like I’m walking down the middle of a deserted street while Northern Lights up there has his eye right on me.”

“He is unable to see us,” Loki assures him in a low whisper.

“And hear us?”

"He may hear us. I need to conserve my strength to silence the car. For now, be as quiet as you can."

Great. But Tony can deal with being quiet, if he has to, stepping carefully to avoid sliding on loose stones. What’s harder to deal with is the feeling of being hunted. Trapped. Vulnerable. Waiting for the bad guy to fall from the sky or pop out from around any corner.

Loki’s hand clasps Tony’s shoulder to stop him. There’s something looming in the fog up ahead. Something tall and bulky and… No, it’s unmoving. Not Thor. Just a truck tipped on its side. Tony exhales, rubbing a hand over his face, though his heart’s still pounding. Behind them, the wind picks up, stirring whirlwinds of dust and sending garbage skidding over the cracked pavement, but still no sign of Thor. He could be anywhere. Above, ahead, a mile away to the left… Tony’s eyes dart from one suspicious shadow to the next, drawn by any little noise, straining to make out shapes through the fog. He should have the suit in a situation like this. Needs the suit. He needs thermal imaging and flight power and body armor and everything else that might stop him from being a sitting duck.

Instead of any of that, he has a half-dead wizard and a desperate wish that the SUV he saw earlier will start. How the hell he gets himself into these situations, he doesn’t even know. But no going back now. He turns down a street to the right and pulls Loki along with him. The SUV should be up ahead, just past the fallen telephone pole.

Then lightning flashes, lighting up the air as bright as day, and a deafening crack of thunder shakes the ground.

“Loki!” Thor’s voice booms from somewhere above. “I know you are here! I can sense your magic!”

Tony’s stomach plunges and he stumbles to a halt, but Loki shoves him forward with a cutting and desperate look: No, we can’t stop now, keep walking!

“Loki! Show yourself!”

In a whistle of wind, Thor comes crashing to the ground. Electricity surges from the hammer and up his arm, glowing a hot blue-white. An ugly sneer twists his face as he pivots in his stance of attack and scans the street. “You know I will find you! You hide behind your magic like a
“Go!” Loki whispers, pushing Tony along with a hand between his shoulder blades. Thor’s now standing directly between them and the Durango. It takes every ounce of willpower Tony has to step forward, sure they’ll be seen... what kind of idiot trusts his life to magical invisibility? But Thor’s gaze slides right over him, right over Loki, searching for a target that can’t be seen. Tony lets himself breathe one tiny sigh of relief. Thor can’t see him. Thor can’t see him. Thor can’t see him. He’ll just keep repeating that in his head as he steps over the fallen telephone pole and around half a dirt bike.

Thor can’t see him, but Thor can see something. His eyes are drawn to what looks like a dark stain on the pavement a few steps behind Loki. Blood. There’s blood on the ground. Little drips and splotches and one partially smeared footprint, all leading Thor along a breadcrumb trail right back to…

There’s no time to even think of what to do before Tony is thrown down, Loki’s hand clapped over his mouth to prevent him from making a sound. Thor’s hammer rips through the air, missing Loki’s shoulder by a fraction of an inch as he drops down on top of Tony. Metal and glass crunch and shatter at the hammer’s impact with the back of a burned-out pickup truck.

“Loki!”

“Go!” Loki hisses in Tony’s ear, shoving him away. “Get to the car! I will deal with Thor!”

Tony doesn’t have to be told twice. He rises up into an awkward crouch and makes a dash around the front of the pickup while hoping like hell he’s still invisible. He ducks down and presses his back against the bumper. There’s the Durango, just across the street, no more than twenty feet away. Twenty feet of open air, lighting, a flying hammer, and a god’s wrath.

Behind him, something smashes into the truck, knocking him forward onto his hands and knees.

“Loki!” Thor shouts. There’s another crash, this time accompanied by a pained groan as the truck skids forward. Tony can guess what hit it. “Where is he?!”

Then Loki’s voice: “Where is who?”

“Do not toy with me! Where is Tony Stark?”

Loki laughs, until there’s a crack sounding too much like a fist connecting with a face.

“Where is Tony Stark?!”

“How should I know?” Loki snarls. “You expect me to keep watch like a nursemaid over your worthless human pets?”

“He was with you when-”

“He was with us. With you. Have you lost him?”

“Loki, I swear on the roots of Yggdrasil, if you do not tell me...”

Tony has to force his body to move. Now, while Thor’s distracted. One hand, one knee, other hand, other knee... that’s it. He crawls out from the safety of the truck to glance back, but from this low angle all he can see is the corner of Thor’s cape caught in the wind.
Loki said to go. Loki said to get to the car. Loki, from the sounds of things, is no longer invisible. Does that mean the spell no longer applies to Tony, or...? He clenches his teeth and swallows hard. No, he has to trust Loki. Loki said to go...

Inch by inch, he stands up and takes a step. He can see Thor’s face now, and the back of Loki’s head. Thor’s eyes don’t even flick in his direction. Another step out into the fog. Thor, oblivious to his presence, slams Loki into the truck for a third time.

“Tell me where he is! We will all go together back to-”

“Thor, are you honestly so stupid as to think I would bring your ally here with me? That I would waste my strength on him?”

Tony steps over a pile of gravel and around a sunken pothole, sticking to hard concrete. No footprints. Halfway there. He just needs to make it a few more feet and he’ll be home free. If he can reach the vehicle, he can get the fuck out of Silent Hill.

“I am weary of your games,” Thor growls, and whatever he does, it draws a choked cry from Loki.

“I am weary of... your clumsy violence...” Loki spits.

Three more steps forward. One to the right to avoid a ridge of wind-blown dirt. Two more quick strides to close the distance, and Tony’s hand is on the SUV’s door. He pulls it open, looking back over his shoulder to see if Thor noticed the sound, but no. Thor’s lifting Loki up by the neck, jerking him forward. Tony slides into the driver’s seat, pulls the door shut with a gentle click, and, reciting a wordless prayer to the God of Mischief for the vehicle to be cloaked in silence as promised, turns the key in the ignition.

The engine whines, sluggishly complaining, and refuses to start. Second try, same result. Third try... he loses hold on the key when Loki suddenly teleports into the seat beside him and collapses over the console with a grunt of pain.

“Drive, Tony Stark,” Loki groans.

“I’m trying! I’m trying. But...” The engine still won’t turn over.

“Why doesn’t it-”

“I don’t know!” In the rear view mirror, he can see Thor spin around, hammer ready in his hand, trying to see where Loki went. “Could be the battery or connections or some other electrical problem...” Fifth try. No luck. Thor’s hammer knocks the burned-out pickup aside.

Sixth try. Thor kicks the telephone pole, cracking it down the middle. He shoves the broken dirt bike aside with his foot and lets out a shout of rage.

Seventh try. Shit. Thor’s attention turns to the Durango.

“Loki...” Tony says as Thor starts forward. “I think... We have to run for it. This thing won’t start. If he...”

“Keep trying,” Loki murmurs. There’s blood trickling down the side of his face, onto his shoulder. New blood. He wipes it away from his eye with two fingers.

“I don’t think-”
“Keep trying.”

He’s doing something. Exactly what ‘something’ is, Tony can’t fully see and doesn’t understand, but it looks a bit like Loki’s using the blood on his fingers to draw a symbol on the palm of his hand and...

_Oh FUCK._ “No!” Tony snaps. “No, you son of a bitch, if that’s what I think it is, if you’re trying that blood magic shit again, the stuff you told me is dangerous and destructive and almost killed you...”

But Loki doesn’t even look at him, doesn’t even listen, doesn’t lose concentration. He traces the symbol three times, speaking something too soft to hear, and raises his hand to his mouth to breathe life into his spell. The symbol smokes, sparks, and a little tongue of flame dances to life.

Outside, mere steps away, Thor’s cape catches fire. Then his armor. Then his hair. Then...

“Drive, Tony Stark.” The little flame in Loki’s hand has grown into a ball of fire the size of an apple, whirling and hissing and spitting. Something crackles, and Thor screams in agony, now completely engulfed.

Bile rises up in Tony’s throat at the sight... the sound. He can see the fiery shape of Thor’s body through the back window as it falls to the ground, frantically rolling in the dirt and clawing at his skin. It does nothing. The blood-magic flames only grow stronger the more he moves. “Loki, stop it,” Tony says, or tries to say. The words come out in a splintered whisper. “That’s enough, that’s... stop it, now!”

“I can’t,” Loki answers.

“Yes, you can. You can stop it. Just end your spell. Let him go.”

“No.” Loki shakes his head. “I’m sorry.” He’s staring down into the flame in his palm with an empty smile, admiring his work. “One thing I neglected to tell you about blood magic is that it cannot be undone. Now drive.”

“I’m not driving anywhere until you stop that fire!”

“Did you not hear what I said? It cannot be undone. Drive!”

The reflection of Thor in the rear view mirror has managed to rip its burning cape off, and part of its armor, but its skin...

“Loki! Jesus Christ, that’s your brother you’re-”

“Blood magic cannot be undone! It can only be diminished, and only reliable way to do that is to put as much distance as possible between the rune and its victim. So if you value Thor’s life, drive!”

Maybe the Durango can sense his urgency. Maybe he’s just destined, finally, for a bit of luck. Tony cranks the key in the ignition and this time the engine puts up only a brief complaint before squealing into action. He jams the gearshift into drive, steps on the gas, and peels away in a storm of gravel.

Slowly, second by second and yard by yard, the flame in Loki’s hand shrinks down to an ember and, finally, a wisp of black smoke. He flexes his fingers and the blood-rune cracks before disintegrating into ash. “He will live,” says Loki.
“You’re a psychopath,” Tony growls, and fucking hell, his heart's pounding in his throat and he can feel the slick sweat beading on his neck and face. “You’re both psychos, you know that? You and Thor. He stabs you, you set him on fire... What is wrong with you that you can do that to each other? Is it just you two? Is it Asgard? Is that kind of shit acceptable there?”

Loki shrugs. “I once saw a man lose a hand at a banquet in a fight over a wheel of cheese.”

“I don’t care. You’re still insane. Both of you: insane! You deserve each other. I don’t even know why I give a shit about either of you, why I let myself get drawn into this mess, why I spent all afternoon worrying about poor, injured Loki when poor Loki is a fucking psychopath who tries to burn his brother alive! Fuck!” He slaps his hand down on the steering wheel so hard his skin stings. “Fuck. I don’t even know.”

“Just drive, Tony stark,” Loki tells him. Smiling. Playing with the ash on his fingers. “We have a long way to go.”

Yeah.

They have a really, really long way to go.
The Kind of Thing Normal People Have

Chapter Summary

Tony does his best to segue back into a normal life, which turns out to be impossible for a lot of reasons. Most of those reasons are 'Loki'.

Chapter Notes

First things first: another big THANK YOU to everyone who’s been following this story so far and leaving comments and kudos. Seriously, your support means so much to me and I <3 you all.

Anyhoo, after the last couple chapters of **DRAMATIC ACTION!!!** I think it’s time for a change of pace, so we’re going to be coasting back down into more... er... domestic scenarios for a while. Fewer brawls. More baths. Hope you enjoy. :)

He remembers the key code to the Phoenix house on the first try, opening the door to a dim foyer and the strong smell of Pine-Sol. As soon as the light flicks on, Loki pushes past him and takes off down the hall to the right.

“If you-” is all Tony has time to say before Loki cuts him off.

“Shower.”

“Are you sure that’s a good-”

This time, Tony cuts himself off, stopping both mid-sentence and mid-stride before Loki has a chance to shoot him one of those classic ‘you are an insufferable cretin’ looks. (Loki does so anyway.) If the God of Assholes wants to have a shower despite the fact that he hasn’t healed at all and is once again dripping blood everywhere he goes, well, he’s a grown man... er... pagan deity... and who’s Tony Stark to stop him?

No, Tony Stark has run out of fucks to give for the time being. Tony Stark is just going to shake his head and walk in the other direction, because Tony Stark is exhausted and mentally drained and needs a drink. Or five. Five drinks sounds good.

His hands tremble as he grabs a bottle of scotch and a shot glass from the liquor cabinet. To say it’s been a long and stressful night would be an understatement along the lines of saying the Titanic hitting that iceberg was a minor miscalculation. He throws back his first drink, and his second, and pours a third before moving to the kitchen table and sagging into a chair. Third drink goes down. The fourth follows.

How long he sits at the table, listening to the clock tick and feeling the scotch tingle its way through his system... he doesn’t even know. Maybe ten minutes. Maybe half an hour. He just needs to clear his head and forget about a couple dozen things. He needs to push all that aside to
let his mind wander and unwind, meandering from one pointless thought to another. Anything but the reality of what happened with Thor. Anything to make him feel normal again, remembering movies he saw as a kid and songs he hasn’t heard since the early 90s. “The Watcher In The Woods”. That was a good movie. Freaked the hell out of him when he was ten, and didn’t he used to have a copy on VHS? What happened to that? Come to think of it, what happened to all the shit he used to have: CDs, tapes, records, that ice cream pail full of his mom’s old 45s? The green steel case full of his dad’s even older 78s, and the variable speed player that went along with it? Yeah, the one with the microphone he could plug in to sing along with Duke Ellington, sitting in the corner of his bedroom, six years old and wearing pajamas printed with rocket ships... Where the hell did all that stuff ever go?

Pepper would know. Pepper probably boxed it up and shipped it off to a storage container somewhere. Pepper...

Slowly, first folding his arms, then lowering his head, Tony leans down to rest on the table. Don’t think about Pepper. Back to movie nostalgia. Safer. Remember that time when you were thirteen and dad let you rent “Heavy Metal” from Video Knights because he thought it was just a cartoon?

He had a well worn, illegally dubbed tape of that, too, somewhere. The misleading orange and white office file label on the end said ‘Flintstones TV Special’ in red pen block letters. Funny how you can picture something so exactly in your mind’s eye even after thirty years.

Maybe, if he concentrates hard enough, he can will himself back to 1983, when the toughest thing he had to worry about was his GPA. He hated being a kid back then. He hated being dependent, constantly having to answer to somebody else and follow the rules. But now? Right now, he’s sure he’d give anything in the world to have parents who could step up, take charge, and tell him what to do.

(Not that Howard ‘n’ Maria would have any better luck in dealing with Loki, but at least the matter would be out of his hands. Also, watching that interaction would probably be good for a few laughs.)

He lifts his head. The clock above the pantry says it’s 6:42 in the morning. Shit. He needs some sleep. In a normal bed. In a normal bedroom. In a normal house with normal things like a running water and electricity and locks on the door and a microwave and an idyllic farmyard painting on the wall and an overstuffed leather sofa in front of a wide-screen TV. And no predatory thunderstorm overhead. All normal. A normal existence. Yeah. That’s what he needs.

His fingers skim over the fringe on the faux Navajo placemat as he stands. Normal. That’s the kind of thing normal people have. Normal people have tacky table settings and shot glasses shaped like cowboy boots. The shot glass fits nicely in his hand, and in his pocket. A little reminder sitting against his hip. Normal.

When he takes a deep breath, he feels a bit better. Calmer, at least. Definitely calmer. All the bad memories of the last two days are locked away behind a nice, clean curtain of scotch, getting blurrier already. Things are returning to normal. Normal house, normal neighborhood, normal city. Normal life.

Just one little abnormality he needs to check on before he can sleep.

The door to the bathroom at the end of the hall is closed, but the sliver of light spilling out from the bottom tells him Loki’s still in there. Shower’s no longer running. Tony knocks at the door.

“Loki?”
An answer comes in the form of a noncommittal grunt: “Nn.”

“You doing okay? Need anything before I go to bed?”

“Nn.”

“Can I come in for a see?”

“Nn.”

“...Was that a yes or a no?”

“Nn.”

Okay then. He’ll just run on the assumption that ‘nn’ is Asgardian for ‘whatever’. The door isn’t locked, nor is there any invisible force holding it shut. Carefully, hesitantly, Tony pushes it open. If he gives Loki ample chance to magically slam it in his face, he can’t really be intruding, right?

The first thing he notices after leaning in for a peek is how the air in the bathroom is so cold he can see his breath. The second thing he notices is the Frost Giant sitting in his bathtub.

The Frost Giant snarls, baring sharp, gray fangs, which would probably be terrifying if it weren’t holding a bottle of bright yellow shower gel in one hand and a lavender washcloth in the other.

“...Oh,” says Tony. That’s all. Just ‘oh’. He could probably expand on that if he tried, but really, ‘oh’ is a pretty accurate representation of how he feels: ‘WTF’ crossed with ‘I’m so done with this shit and no longer care’.

So much for normal.

“What do you want?” asks the Frost Giant. The question is underscored by a low, rumbling growl in its throat.

“Nothing much,” Tony answers, trying to sound casual. Which is, surprisingly enough, a lot easier than he thought it might be. Yeah, talking to a large blue extraterrestrial monster is no big deal. He should probably thank a special kind of open-mindedness honed on hours of Star Trek reruns for that. “Just, you know, checking in. Wanted to see how you’re doing. But you look, um... Actually, you look pretty good.”

If the Frost Giant had eyebrows, it would be raising them right now. But what he said is the truth: it... no, Loki (Tony needs to remember that ‘it’ is nothing more than a new variety of cool-mint Loki, now thirty percent larger, for a limited time only) looks pretty good. Or at least better, in a no-longer-bleeding-profusely kind of way. The gash on his chest has scabbed over, and the bathtub water is clear. No more blood.

“You found a way to fix yourself up?”

“Jotun bodies heal quickly,” says Loki. It still sounds like he’s growling.

“Huh. Well, guess it’s as good a solution as any.”

Now, speaking in a purely practical sense, Tony should probably back away slowly, make a polite exit, and go to bed. Leave the frozen alien alone. That would be the smart thing to do. The normal, safe thing to do. The scientific thing to do, though...

He flips down the toilet seat lid and sits, Loki tracking his every move with deep-set crimson eyes.
Staring. Growling. Though Tony’s starting to suspect that the growl isn’t so much a warning or intimidation tactic as it is simply the way Jotuns sound when they breathe. And that scowling glare isn’t really anger or annoyance, but just the way Jotun faces usually look. He hopes.

It’s hard to say whether or not any hint of the Loki he knows is hiding behind those grim alien features. Maybe in the straight line of his nose or the curve of his jaw. Almost certainly in the way he narrows his eyes and gives Tony that long-suffering look. The rest, though, is so foreign: sharp and severe, every ridge of every bone prominently exaggerated. Rough, gray-blue skin stretches taut over lean muscle. Not one speck of softness, just harsh angles and hard planes. And those bright, gleaming red eyes.

“Why do you stare at me?” Loki asks in a voice that rumbles and cracks like grating ice.

“I’m curious and, at the moment, just tipsy and sleep-deprived enough to have all the social skills of a small child.”

Loki’s jaw might tighten. His eyes might narrow a little more. The cold and brittle rigidity of his Jotun face makes these little emotional nuances hard to detect. Then, after a moment, he turns away with nothing more than a dismissive “Hm.” He dunks his frozen washcloth in the water to thaw it, breaks up the ice that’s formed around his legs and waist, and resumes his bath.

Tony stares. Nuts to being polite and averting his gaze; he doubts even the Queen of England would be able to maintain proper etiquette when faced with the opportunity to watch an enormous, frosty space man bathe. He stares as Loki squeezes the washcloth over his shoulder, water droplets turning to ice upon contact with his skin. And he stares as a glob of yellow shower gel freezes into something close to solid soap in Loki’s hand.

“You know,” he says, “I’m trying to decide which is weirdest: you taking a bath despite the water constantly turning to ice around you, just the general concept of you taking a bath at all in this form, or the thought of Frost Giants using shower gel.”

“I dislike being covered in blood,” Loki replies.

“But you like being covered in... what the hell is ‘Tropical Sunburst’?”

“Yes.”

Tony nods. “Okay. Scratch the question. That is definitely weirdest.”

But maybe even Frost Giants enjoy smelling like coconut and flowers. So Tony stares again, this time as Loki coats his skin with frozen gel and washes it away with shards of ice. Ice on blue skin. Limbs awkwardly angled and cramped in a bathtub that’s been designed for a much smaller species. It’s still no less weird even after taking in the sight of that strange body.

Loki’s face, back, chest, shoulders, arms, legs, and all other parts Tony can see are covered in the fine, raised lines he saw back in Texas. Too perfect and symmetrical to be scars. Too fluid and organic to be anything but a natural part of his body, like the intricate markings on a butterfly’s wings. Natural decoration.

“No all Jotuns have the same lines, or are they different from person to person?”

“Somewhat different, in small ways,” says Loki. “As far as I know. The lines are similar but not identical. Why are you still staring at me?”

“Because I’ve already memorized the pattern on the floor tiles and you’re easily the second most
interesting thing in this bathroom. Can I touch your skin?"

Loki turns to look at him sharply. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Um, I think the question you should be asking is, ‘why wouldn’t I want to do that?’ You’re a
giant blue alien. You look really cool. No pun intended. I’m assuming you’d feel like a frozen
lizard, but my scientific mind wants to know for sure."

He doesn’t wait for Loki’s answer before raising his hand, though he does let it hover, inches from
Loki’s upper arm, at a safe distance. Loki, still fixing him with that prickly gaze, gives him no
leave to continue, but nor does he pull away. He just stares. Unblinking. Wary, but... not
opposed? Or so Tony hopes, as he leans forward to close the gap between them and his fingertips
meet Loki’s skin.

At first, it feels no different than touching a rock coated in frost. Frigid. Rough. Hard. Then it
bites. Loki’s skin radiates bitter cold, not content to just subtly freeze on its own, but full of what
feels like a malicious intent to suck the warmth out of everything around it and turn the world to
ice. Just from that tiny scrap of contact, the heat drains from Tony’s hand, past his wrist, and
halfway up his arm. He jerks his hand back; the pad of one of his fingers is already white and
numb. “Jesus Christ,” he says, shaking his hand to try to circulate some warm blood through it.
His entire arm now feels like he dunked it in a barrel of ice water. “That’s... that’s nothing like a
frozen lizard.”

“You should not have done it,” Loki says quietly.

“I regret nothing,” Tony replies. Which isn’t totally accurate. He kind of regrets the part where
Loki’s cold started to seep up his arm, because now it’s reached his shoulder and the top of his
chest and he can’t stop shivering. He grabs a towel down from the shelf above the toilet and wraps
it around himself like a blanket. That’s a little better. “Though to be honest, it feels worse than
touching metal in the dead of a New York winter. Do you think if I licked you, my tongue would
stick?”

The look Loki gives him at that says, very clearly, Tony Stark, are you on fucking crack?

He may need a better brain-mouth filter. “Sorry. I tend to think out loud a lot of the time, and to
be honest, I bet less than half of my thoughts are actually intelligent.”

Loki nods. Then pauses to break up the bathwater ice that’s formed around him again. Then says,
“I think you are very intelligent.”

“Well obviously, yeah, overall, ‘intelligent’ is a gross understatement, but...” Hang on. “...Did you
just say something nice to me?”

“It is true. You are perhaps the most intelligent person I’ve ever met.”

Did he stumble into the Twilight Zone? Did he fall asleep at the wheel and crash the Durango,
leaving him in a coma-dream somewhere? Did Thor actually succeed in killing him, and now he
and Loki are stuck in some kind of backwards purgatory where nothing makes sense? “But...
you’re being nice to me.”

“Why would I not be nice to you?” Loki asks, accompanied by a gesture that might be the Jotun
equivalent to a shrug. “We are friends.”

“Yeah but...” He gives his head a shake. “I figured we were the kind of dysfunctional friends
where I constantly complain about how weird you are, and you always threaten to tear my skin
“I would not tear your skin off,” says Loki. And he stares at Tony with a snarling expression that’s hard as rock (because that’s just how Jotuns look all the time, apparently) but also... There’s something unexpectedly sympathetic in his red eyes. “That is nothing more than an empty threat.”

Okay. “...Thanks. Um. Are you...” He pauses to rake his hair back, because really, what the hell is going on? “I mean, did you... Did Thor hit you really hard in the head or something? Are you confused? Do you have a concussion? You’re acting strange and it’s kind of worrying. Are you trying to lull me into a false sense of security in preparation for something worse later?”

“No.”

“But if you were, you’d still say that, wouldn’t you?” Yeah, he would. Because Loki is, by nature, a sneaky SOB who’s probably just trying out a new way to screw with Tony’s mind. Well, good luck. Tony’s on to his tricks. And that’s what this is. Just another trick. It has to be.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, quick to change the subject. “I don’t know if I am or not. I was hungry about four hours ago when I wanted to stop at that all-night diner and you wouldn’t let me, back when you were still an asshole, but now I might be past hunger. I might be too tired. Really, I should...”

“You should go to bed,” Loki agrees.

“Yeah, I’ll let you finish your bath,” says Tony. The tub’s full of more ice than water now; how Loki can even move in it is a mystery. Maybe he’s one with the ice or some other such metaphysical bullshit. Who knows. Standing, Tony pulls off his towel cape and chucks it over the back of the toilet. “I need to sleep. When I wake up, though, everything better be back to normal.”

“I will return to my usual form,” Loki assures him.

“No, I meant ‘normal’ as in ‘you stop being nice to me’. The Frost Giant, I can live with. It’s the niceness that weirds me out. So when I wake up, you’d better be a dick again.”

Slowly, Loki drops his head to the side, looking up at Tony from beneath the sharp ridge of his blue-gray brow. “Tony Stark, I do not mean to-”

“You better be a dick again. That’s all I’m gonna say. Because unless you’re rolling your eyes and telling me to shut up before you pull out my guts with your bare hands and strangle me with my own intestines...” He pauses in the doorway to look back at Loki. “I’m worried about you, buddy.”

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It’s a little after three when Tony wakes up. Afternoon sunlight slants in through the blinds at exactly the right angle to catch his eye; he blinks, groans, and lifts a hand to cover his face. He’d had this thought, right before falling asleep, that it’d sure be nice to wake up feeling refreshed and rested for once. Apparently that’s too much to ask. He still feels like he hasn’t slept in days.

Sometime in the last couple of hours Loki must’ve decided to leave the bathroom, because there he is, lying on the bed at Tony’s side. Regular Loki. Human-ish Loki. Loki wearing, once again, nothing but a towel. The sight’s almost enough to ignite a spark of optimism that maybe, just maybe, the horrific insanity of the past two days is over and they can now settle down into the tolerable craziness of Atlantic City once again.
Only Loki’s now marked with a long and jagged scar, running in a deep line from a few inches below his collar bone to just above his left hip. A glaring reminder of everything that’s happened. It looks painful still: dull red and edged with bruises. Loki’s shoulders are curved inward to protect his injury, his whole body cautiously tense around it. But his face is nothing but peaceful in sleep. Eyes softly closed, lips slightly parted. The sunbeam catching fiery highlights in his dark hair as it spills across the pillow.

This isn’t the God of Mischief. Not the god of anything, not right now. Not an enemy, not a threat, not a destructive alien or giant or sorcerer... Not a psychotic murderer. Just Loki. Just a normal person. Normally sleeping. Gentle and serene. His shoulder rises and falls with each slow breath like anybody else's.

Without even thinking, Tony lifts his hand to brush aside a stray curl from Loki’s face. Loki’s eyes flicker open at the touch.

“Sorry,” says Tony, immediately pulling his hand away. “I was just... seeing if you were asleep.”

“By prodding me in the eye?”

He nods. “Yes.” Because that’s a hell of a lot less embarrassing than admitting what he was actually doing.

A grunt of annoyance huffs its way up from Loki’s throat and he rolls over, turning his back on Tony.

“Wait a sec, was that an exasperated snort I just heard?” Tony asks, propping himself up on one arm as he leans forward. “Did you just exasperatedly snort at me?”

Loki actually growls, sounding uncannily like his former Jotun self. “I’ll do far worse than make sounds at you if you don’t shut your mouth and stop bothering me when I’m trying to sleep.”

With a growing grin, Tony climbs out of bed. “Welcome back, asshole.”

He yawns his way down the hallway to the kitchen, one hand absently scratching over the growth of stubble on his face. When’s the last time he shaved? Yesterday? No, he didn’t bother. Saturday? Friday. It was Friday morning. Awesome. Nothing like letting yourself go for three days to really drive home the point about being on the run with a wanted fugitive. He’ll just pencil ‘personal grooming’ into this afternoon’s schedule. Right after ‘eat a lot of food’ and ‘shower for at least twenty minutes’.

There’s nothing in the fridge except condiments, a pack of tortillas, and what might be the dried up husk of a lemon. The freezer, apart from a bag of peas and some mystery meat in a Ziplock, offers only tray upon tray of ice cubes so old they’re covered in a thick layer of frost. Pantry: stale crackers, canned corn, four different bottles of oil, and an entire shelf of spice jars and only spice jars.

All of this points to delivery pizza. Something with multiple kinds of meat, cheese, and grease. Comfort food brought straight to his front door in a slightly soggy box by a weasel-faced man who claims to have no change for a fifty.

“Why would you care about a handful of paltry human dollars?” Loki asks when Tony complains about it.

“I don’t care about the money, but the principle of the...” He stops himself right there. Miniscule problems seem a lot tinier somehow when talking to Loki. Nobody wants to be 'that guy': the one
who wasted a god's time bitching about being ripped off to the tune of a whole thirty bucks. "No, you're right, I don't actually give a shit. Anyway, sit up. Let's eat this while it's still kind of hot."

He sits on the edge of the bed next to Loki, setting the open pizza box between them. Loki leans over to investigate with a suspicious sniff. "It looks terrible."

"You only say that because you're an anti-American, freedom-hating communist. Come on. Give it a try."

He must be hungry, because he sniffs it again. Probably starving, even, after who knows how many days of no food. With a look that seems bent on conveying the idea that he's only doing this for Tony's benefit, as a favor, (not because he's starving and desperate enough to stoop to eating inferior Earth food, oh no) his fingers reach down in pincer formation to pluck a single piece of green pepper from the top of the pizza. Eyes locked on Tony's, he lifts it to his mouth. And immediately spits it back out again with a sound of disgust. "That's terrible!"

"Well yeah, you picked the worst part," says Tony. "Green peppers only on there so we can lie to ourselves about this being a balanced meal. Try the-"

"No. I don't like your food."

Tony tries not to sigh in frustration. Really. "Then what do you like? Stop being such a whiny food martyr and tell me what you want to eat. I'll get it. I can get you literally any kind of food in the world, but you have to tell me."

Loki leans back against the headboard, and the way he crosses his arms indicates he has no intention of ever dropping his whiny food martyr act. "I like... simple food," he finally says. "Meat and cheese and bread and-"

"This is meat and cheese and bread," Tony interrupts, gesturing down at the pizza. "You've just described, with perfect accuracy, exactly what a pizza is."

"It has a strange taste. The sauce is unpleasant. I prefer subtler, natural flavors."

"Says the man who drinks box after box of Hi-C. But sure, fine. For dinner I'll order Chinese. You can have steamed white rice with nothing on it."

"Fine," Loki agrees, looking pointedly away.

"Fine!" Tony grabs a slice of pizza and crams it roughly into his mouth. It's amazing, really, how Loki can get him so riled up over absolutely nothing in seconds flat. Straight from zero to want-to-punch-in-face, and all he has to do is... not eat his lunch. Asshole. "You know what I told you earlier about being normal and acting like a dick?" he says to Loki through a mouthful of cheese. "I retract that statement. I liked you way better as a Frost Giant. It was a huge improvement on your personality."

"That's only because Jotnar are painfully stupid and easily suggestible," Loki sneers.

"I disagree," says Tony. "You told me I was the smartest person you knew. Obviously a being of superior brain power would recognize intelligence in others."


"Even you?"
“Yes, even me. One of the reasons I hate that form is due to a very real fear that one day I will shift and then not have the sense to return. Fighting Thor, I shifted back completely by accident when the circumstances changed and my moronic Jotun self hazily remembered that he can use magic. As soon as I call the magic back, my body shifts by default into this form. Today, though... I only shifted back because you told me to. If you hadn’t said anything, I’d likely still be sitting in the bath stuck on stupid Jotun thoughts about killing things and mating.”

And that’s when Tony feels his breath hitch. “I see. So, just so I know for future reference... When I was in the bathroom with you, was I in danger of being killed or, um...?”

“No.” Laughing like the slimy jackass he is, Loki smirks. “No, you were never in danger, Tony Stark. Jotnar are also overzealous in their loyalties, and my Jotun self seems to be under the impression that you are his greatest friend in the world. Had anyone else appeared there’s a good chance I would have eaten them, but not you. Also,” he adds, like an afterthought, “you are hideously unattractive through Jotun eyes. So there would be no attempts at mating, either.”

He’s pretty sure he’s never been thankful for being called ‘hideously unattractive’ before, but hey, there’s a first time for everything. “What do I look like through Jotun eyes?”

“Like food,” says Loki, completely unapologetic. “A neat little package of warm meat with no hard shell or spines or even hair to protect you. Jotnar can see heat. They can see the sparkle of blood pulsing through your veins, the dark contraction of muscles beneath your skin, the glow of tender organs... You look like layer upon layer of nice, soft, edible parts.”

An unwelcome chill slides down Tony’s back, ending up somewhere near his soft, edible parts deep inside as gray fangs flash through his memory. He sets his pizza aside. “Okay. Um. That was very detailed and... disturbing and... Thank you for not eating me, I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” says Loki. And he picks up Tony’s discarded pizza slice, tearing off a little pinch of crust to pop into his mouth.

Tony can only shake his head. “Why is it that talking about eating my internal organs is the only thing that makes you show the least bit of interest in food?”

“Let me tell you a story,” Loki says. He pulls the rest of the crust off the piece of pizza, careful to remove any hint of sauce, and takes a bite. “I was not terribly interested in food on Asgard, either. When I was a child, mother would have fits trying to convince me to eat anything at all. All I would tolerate with any sort of regularity was mushrooms, so we had mushrooms at every meal and I put up a great fuss while she tried to stuff bits of meat and bread down my throat. That slowly changed as I grew older, but I never enjoyed eating or cared for food as some others did. It was an unpleasant chore. Until one day... Thor went out on his first hunt. His first time riding with our father’s men. When he came back, he told me in horror that they had made him eat the heart of the stag they killed. Fresh and still warm, straight from the beast’s body, it was a rite of passage into manhood that he eat the heart.”

Loki chooses this moment to pause and take another bite of pizza crust. Tony feels his jaw involuntarily tighten.

“Thor actually cried about it. In private, of course, where nobody else could see, he sniveled like a maiden on my shoulder over how he had watched that poor stag die and then choked down its bloody heart, trying not to vomit. And do you know what I thought? I thought, ‘Goodness, Thor, you are one weak little boy, to bawl like this over having to eat the heart of an animal.’ That hardly sounded so terrible to me. In fact it sounded... perfectly natural. I thought about it, over and over. I played the scenario in my mind. I imagined what it would be like to taste blood on my
tongue and feel raw muscle tear between my teeth. I thought about it every day, at every meal, until it was my turn to go on my first hunt, and my turn to eat the stag’s heart while father’s men stood laughing and jeering in a circle, certain I would gag and fail and dishonor myself. But I ate the heart. And they cheered. And I ate the liver as well, and they cheered more. And I ate the kidney, and they fell silent... and the tongue, just to tease them... No one spoke a word as we returned to the palace with a torn-up stag carcass and me covered in blood. Father was so upset over what I had done, though he refused to tell me why. At the time, I assumed it was because he was siding with Thor, who was furious at me for showing him up. Now I know better. Which reminds me of a similar story.”

“No,” Tony says quickly. “That’s okay. One story’s good.” He holds out his hands, a pleading gesture, because he’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to hear any more of this. Coming from anyone else, a story about eating raw animal innards might make a guy cringe, but from Loki it’s disturbing. Beyond disturbing. Because Loki means every word that he says, and he says them so coldly.

Loki ignores him, launching straight into the next tale. “Thor and I once went to Jotunheim with father.”

“No,” Tony repeats. “I don’t really want to hear any more of your stories.”

“But of course you do,” Loki replies with a thin smile. “Isn’t that why we’re here? You want me to talk to you. You want me to tell you things. You want me to tell you about the Tesseract, of course, and the Chitauri, and perhaps we will get to those later. But you also want to know why I’m even here on your dull little planet, and why I would bother bringing my army to enslave you all instead of simply grabbing the Tesseract and moving on to bigger and better worlds. You want to know what I’m thinking, and you want to know all about my poor hurt feelings, because you think that if you can only understand my point of view you’ll be able to convince me that I’ve made a terrible mistake and I need to turn my life around.”

His eyes bore into Tony’s like a flame. Not searching, just staring. Challenging. Tony stares right back, waiting for Loki to add something more. Nothing comes.

“Sure,” Tony finally says. Voice quiet. As if he can force some measure of control over the conversation by making Loki work to hear him. “You seem to have spent a lot more time thinking about this than I have, so you’re the boss. Go ahead; tell me stuff. It just better be relevant to me wanting to Holy Savior your ass or whatever it is you think I’m doing.” He picks up a new slice of pizza. A tiny, deliberate, totally pointless act of defiance.

“Everything I say is always relevant, Tony Stark. Why would I say it if it weren’t?”

Because you’re the God of Lies and you enjoy orchestrating chaos, a voice in Tony’s head answers. “Because you’re-” he almost repeats, but catches himself. “Never mind. Relevant away.”

So Loki begins the story again. “Thor and I once went to Jotunheim with our father. It was some pointless political visit: father would negotiate terms of the ongoing peace treaty with the Jotnar, Thor and I would stand there looking pretty and doing nothing, like little trophies. During this visit we attended a court banquet, which was depressingly awkward as Laufey, the Jotun king, tried his best to emulate the customs of Asgard and eat off of plates while sitting at a table instead of having everyone rip their food apart on the floor like animals. And do you know what Jotun food is?”

That’s something Tony can guess easily enough. Unfortunately. “…Raw meat…”
“Very good,” Loki says with a sharp and entirely unfriendly grin. “You’re paying attention. Yes, raw meat. So dark it was nearly black, slimy with blood... just bowls of meat and entrails. And fungus. Odd mushrooms and lichens are all that grow on Jotunheim, apart from a few stunted trees. Thor turned gray at the sight of it – I knew exactly what he was thinking – and father gave us one of his looks. The ‘you do one thing to embarrass me and I will thrash you’ look. I watched as he stoically lifted one piece after another to his mouth, and watched as Thor tried to do the same, but choked on it. Then I happily ate everything I was given, and took more when it was offered. Laufey beamed with pleasure at the sight of prince of Asgard enjoying his hospitality. Father seemed happy this time, and Thor... Well, Thor was angry at me for showing him up again, and tried to eat his share, and was sick later. And do you know what the odd thing was?”

Tony shakes his head, and Loki closes his eyes.

“I never once wondered why I was different. I never even thought to ask, why could I eat their food, when Thor, who was so clearly superior to me in every measurable way, gagged to even look at it? Why did I prefer it? Those thoughts never crossed my mind. I never wondered why I had an easier time than Thor in reading Jotun emotions, or why I could look at them without flinching in disgust, or why, when I was a child, I suffered every night through dreams of ice and frost and dark cold so consuming it felt like I was being frozen from the inside out... I would wake up shivering, unable to move. And I never wondered why. I never... If that’s not proof of Jotun stupidity...”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘stupid’ to not-” Tony tries to say, but Loki silences him with a hiss.

“Let me finish, Tony Stark,” Loki snaps. “Let me tell you how Laufey died.”

Okay. Tony sets aside his pizza and slides over on the bed so he can sit facing Loki, straight on, and folds his hands in his lap. If this is what Loki wants to talk about, if this is relevant...

It is. He can see that in the low fire smoldering in Loki’s eyes.

“I killed him,” Loki finally says. “After Thor was banished, I lured him into Asgard, and he was stupid enough to follow. All I needed do was promise him a chance at revenge against Odin, and he followed me like a dog. He and his warriors. Idiots. All of them. If they had a single functioning brain between them they would have taken me hostage and tried to ransom me back to Asgard for their damned Casket, but no. They followed my plan, like I knew they would, because they were too stupid to think for themselves and recognize a trap. And Laufey was supposedly renowned for his cunning! Jotunheim’s clever king. He was an idiot. He deserved to die.”

“He deserved to die for being stupid?” Tony interjects. “That’s a little harsh.”

Loki’s face twists in a scowl. “He deserved to die for the choices he made. For perpetuating the myth that he knew what was best for his people. That was the only intelligent thing he ever did: convincing all those Jotnar he was smarter than they. Arguably not a difficult feat, but he was not the biggest or strongest and he needed some edge to put him above everyone else to make him worthy to lead. Laufey was small for a giant. Hardly over eight feet tall. Average Jotun height is closer to ten, and some are even larger than that. Two of his sons are big, lumpen idiots. The third was small, like Laufey himself, but... he was abandoned and left to die as an infant.”

And that’s the end of Loki’s tale. Tony holds his breath through the pause that follows, waiting for more, but that’s all, story time finishing as abruptly as it started. Loki stares at him again with that challenging gaze. The one that makes Tony think Loki may just be able to see through him. Heat-seeking Jotun eyes locking on his vulnerable interior. Demanding a reaction.

It’s a game, Tony realizes. Or a test. Loki made his move, throwing out all those pieces of his
past under the guise of aimless reminiscing, and now it’s Tony’s turn. Tony gets to guess. He gets to pull everything together, sorting out the filler from the clues, and build up a cryptic message one brick at a time. *Everything Loki says is relevant*...

“You don’t really hate being Jotun at all,” Tony begins. First guess. Loki’s eyes narrow. Target hit. “If you did, you’d try to hide it at all costs instead of highlighting all the ways you’re still like them even in Asgardian form. Maybe you did hate them when you first found out. But you’ve spent the last year going who knows where with who knows what, and that must’ve been an eye-opener. After that, Jotun doesn’t seem so bad any more. Actually, it comes in handy at times. What relevant thing did you say yesterday morning? Your Chitauri jailers weren’t too thrilled with you suddenly turning into a Frost Giant? Maybe it’s not as bad as those jerks in Asgard say, being bigger than everybody else and able to freeze whatever you touch. You don’t hate that. You embrace it. Maybe you don’t love it, but you recognize an advantage when you see one, and this is a major advantage.”

Yeah, that's it. He's on the right track. He must be, because Loki’s mouth is suddenly shut up tighter than a bank vault. So he continues, “Being Jotun also provides some convenient answers for why you were never like the other Asgardians. You were the weird kid, weren’t you? The one everyone laughed and jeered at and expected to fail in his first hunt. The one who was always compared, unfairly and unfavorably, to ‘measurably superior’ Thor. But the stag heart and Laufey’s pride at the banquet when you did the one thing Thor couldn’t... those moments stand out in your mind. Those time you outshone Thor? You can’t hate the thing that allowed you to do it. You can’t hate the thing that made you different, for once, in a better way. No matter how stupid you think the Jotuns are, you still know their value.”

And now Loki's haughty smirk has faded completely. His expression has washed away into nothing: no challenge, no spark, no emotion at all. Just blank. Like a mask. He's a skilled liar, but his go-to lie, when things aren't going his way, is always no lie at all. Just empty silence. Tony's seen it before.

“What’s the matter, Space Oddity?” Tony asks. “Don’t like where I’m headed with this?”

“You presume an awful lot,” Loki murmurs, his voice every bit as flat and unreadable as his face.

“I thought that was what I was supposed to be doing. You tell me things, I jump to conclusions. But let’s keep going: I still have the last bit of your grand confession to over-analyze. Like that part where you told me how this Laufey guy died. Why is that relevant? Well, on the surface, it’s not... unless you take into account that you’ve now come to terms with your Jotun origins. You killed Laufey – hell, you tried to destroy all of Jotunheim – immediately after finding out the truth about yourself. That seems like a reckless, emotional explosion. And now you regret it. Because now you know they could have been useful allies. You regret killing Laufey, and try to justify your actions by telling yourself he was stupid, he didn’t deserve to be king, he was some monster who left his own son to die because the kid wasn’t as big as-”

The pieces of the puzzle don’t so much click into place as crash.

“...Oh.”

Laufey was small for a giant. Eight feet tall. Average Jotun height is ten. Loki, standing next to Thor, looked about...

A fraction of a sneer twitches on the side of Loki’s mouth before falling back to nothing. “Well done, Tony stark,” he whispers.
Tony coughs. Looks down at his knees. Shit. And here he thought he was all done with feeling sorry for poor psychopath Loki. “So I guess that’s why you killed him, huh.”

“One reason,” says Loki.

“And the others?”

“What, you can’t guess? Don’t you understand me? You don’t see things from my point of view, even after this meaningful, heartfelt talk we’ve just shared?”

“No.” He pushes a hand back through his hair. “I guess I don’t.”

Loki’s reply is preceded by a smug little ‘mm’ sound. “That’s right. You don’t.”

“Then maybe you can help me understand by telling me how the balls this is relevant to our... your... whatever... quest for the Tesseract?”

“When did I say it was?”

“You told me a minute ago that everything you say is relevant!” Tony all but shouts.

“Yes, but in this case, the stories were relevant only to why I dislike your ‘pizza’.”

No, there’s more to it than that. There’s more to Loki than that. He can feel it deep inside his bones that this all ties together somehow: the Jotuns, Loki’s actions, the Tesseract, the Chitauri, whatever shit show he’s planning for the future. There’s a thread, however small, however difficult to pick out from the mass tangle of events, that connects them all. He just can’t see it yet. It’s still buried beneath too many other layers, outside of his reach. So close, but...

Infuriating. Not all the game pieces are yet in place.

“Oh, whatever,” he says, grabbing the pizza box and standing up. “I’m done. And I’m taking this to the dining room so I can sit at a table and eat like a normal person. You wanna come with, or are you going to stay in here being creepy by yourself?”

“I’m going back to sleep.”

Tony nods. “Creepy it is. Good choice.”

He’s two steps out into the hallway before reconsidering and turning back. “Purely out of curiosity, do I have anywhere near the number of clues needed to unravel your crazy web of evil plots?” he asks.

“Not even close,” answers Loki.

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Takeout phở tái comes with thinly sliced raw beef on the side, meant to be swished through steaming broth piece by piece and cooked on the spot before being eaten.

There’s probably a good reason why Tony decides to drive across Phoenix during rush hour in a stolen SUV with New Mexico plates to visit the one Vietnamese restaurant he sort of knows how to find, but for the life of him he can’t figure out what it is. He’ll just attribute it to a sudden craving for spring rolls.
Reluctantly Evil Tony

Chapter Summary

Riding on the coattails of nostalgia, Tony lets his impatience get the better of him and winds up making a good old-fashioned deal with the devil. Loki doesn’t even bother to get out of bed.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a lot of filler dialogue, and I figured the best way to make up for that would be to stuff it full of as many stupid jokes as possible. Yep.

Confession time: Tony takes an inordinate amount of pleasure in sitting on the floor and eating day-old pizza while wearing a tuxedo.

He's surrounded by boxes. That’s the part that isn’t so pleasurable. In a spectacular show of coincidence, it turns out the house in Phoenix is full of boxes of shit. Box upon box. Shit upon shit. Boxes of tapes, boxes of CDs, boxes of books, boxes of gadgets, boxes of a weird assortment of crap that, judging by the newspaper used to pack it, looks like it was swept off a bookshelf in January of 1992 and hasn’t seen the light of day since. He sort of remembers doing that. He sort of remembers all this stuff. Or maybe he just remembers remembering all this stuff yesterday.

He also remembers an hour ago when sorting through it all seemed like a really good idea. ‘Nostalgia therapy’, he called it. What better way to boot superhero craziness out of his mind than by sifting through boxes of his mundane past? Answer: a better way to boot superhero craziness out of his mind would be to smoke a doob and pass out in the hot tub, but this also works. Actually, what works is sitting on the floor with his pizza while thumbing through a road atlas of eastern Canada from 1975. There’s a polaroid taped to the inside cover of his family standing on a windy walkway. The background gives away nothing but clouds of mist, but his mother’s elegant handwriting along the bottom of the frame identifies the location as Niagara Falls, Ontario. In the photo, her hair is blowing across her face. Tony’s father is turned away from the camera, the shot catching him in profile, and five-year-old Tony looks sullen and unimpressed, slouching against the guard rail. All in all, a classic Stark family portrait, of the quality one might expect to find taped as a memento inside an obsolete road atlas.

Kneeling up, Tony pulls open more boxes until he finds one with more photo albums. There aren't many. His parents were never really into the whole photography thing. The newest album, a sickly salmon number with some swans on the front, has the label ‘Christmas 90 – Fall 91’. No, not gonna look at that one. The baby blue kitten album says ‘Spring 84 – Summer 85.’ Might be good for a laugh. One covered in horrible nubby orange fabric has ‘1978’ written down the spine, and when he flips it open, he’s greeted by a picture of himself shooting the camera a gap-tooth grin over a birthday cake shaped like an alligator.

There are more albums from earlier years, full of people he doesn’t know and places he doesn’t
recognize, playing croquet at garden parties and holding cocktails. Then the framed photos, and the ones in little cardboard folders. His mom the fashion plate in a macramé dress and giant hat. His dad and Uncle Ed on a fishing boat circa 1950. Dad again, much younger, with his arm around a stunning blonde as the two stand beneath a banner that reads ‘Happy New Year 1939’. Mom’s college graduation photo. Dad’s graduation photo. Tony’s own graduation photo. Someone really should’ve stepped in to prevent that haircut from being immortalized on film. (Actually, somebody should’ve stepped in to prevent most of his haircuts from being immortalized on film. A lot of his photos could legitimately be used as cautionary illustrations for the phrase ‘men’s style disasters of the late twentieth century’. And yet he thought he looked so slick at the time. Damn.)

The picture at the bottom of the box, in a thin gold frame, is from the Stark Industries Christmas party in 2004. He's in a navy pinstripe suit and his hair looks, thankfully, pretty normal in the post-frosted-tips era. A little less gray, but otherwise things haven’t changed a lot since then. And it’s a kind of a nice picture overall. Dorky smile, but nice picture. Best one of him in the whole box by far.

Pepper standing next to him looks so much younger.

Wearing a modest ivory dress, hair cut in a shaggy, shoulder-length bob... Her face is a little rounder, a little softer. The way she holds her arms is awkward and self-conscious. A tight, closed-lipped smile just touches her mouth, but... Her eyes glitter. Her eyes smile wide, joyfully, straight into the camera, and she looks so happy and so beautiful.

She is so beautiful. Intelligent. Kind. Patient.

Perfect.

The longer he stares at the picture, the heavier it grows, as if ideas and memories and even intangible regrets can have mass. The kind of mass that starts as a stinging thorn somewhere near his heart and sinks down, expanding as it falls, becoming a dead weight like a coiled chain in his gut. Constrictive. Binding him from the inside. Threatening to fuse itself in place as a permanent fixture, just when he'd convinced himself he'd come to terms with how things ended.

No, that was a lie. One more lie in the long series of lies he's told himself all his life. This one weak enough to be undone by nothing more than a photo.

(Oh, Pepper...)

She put up with him for years, forgave him every stupid thing he ever did (and a lot of them were pretty fucking stupid), and shrugged off a thousand and one of his bad choices with nothing more than a resigned sigh. She was the person he could count on. The closest thing he had to family. He could be himself when he was with her, however lame and uncertain and vulnerable he felt, shedding the stifling public act of Being Tony Stark. She was sexy as hell at those ridiculous black tie things they always had to go to, and even hotter sitting on the couch eating nachos. Just being content. Together.

And he turned away from all of that because of... what, exactly? A couple stupid arguments, differing opinions, stubbornness, and shortened nerves brought on by the stress of building that damn tower and bouncing back and forth between California and New York? Basically the same shit all couples have to deal with over the course of any relationship?

Okay, so maybe not all couples undertake the building of a skyscraper, but it’s pretty much the same principle as renovating a house, albeit on a giant scale, and other people get through that. The point is, he allowed a bunch of unimportant crap to distract him from what mattered, and he
dropped the ball like a whiny little bitch instead of putting on his big boy pants and working things out to stay in the game.

He pushes the photo aside and diggs his fingers into his eyes.

*Shit.*

There are certain things people need to do over the course of their lives. Normal, human things that prove they’re normal, human people. Which means there’s a certain thing Tony Stark needs to do right now.

He needs to put on those big boy pants and go back to New York.

ooo

Loki’s either asleep or pretending to be asleep; it’s impossible to tell from the doorway, staring into the shadowy bedroom with curtains drawn against the midday sun. He’s nothing more than a dark, blanketed lump in the bed. Tony clears his throat. Loki doesn’t move. Maybe he really is asleep.

“Hey. Loki?”

Nope. Not asleep. Loki grunts as he rolls onto his stomach, flattening his body against the bed as his head disappears under the sheets.

“It’s almost one. You getting up today?”

“No,” says Loki. Except the way he says it is more like a ‘neh’, like half the word, like he can’t be bothered to form a whole coherent thought.

“What’s the matter?” Tony asks as he crosses the room to sit next to Loki’s feet. “Still recovering?”

He earns another apathetic ‘neh’ in reply.

“Grumpy? Angry? Depressed, wondering where your life went wrong that you ended up languishing in suburban America with me? That’s okay. People get depressed. It’s a common thing these days. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Go away.”

“No, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Tony Stark, if you don’t-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, if I don’t leave you alone you’ll rip out my stomach and make me wear it as a hat, or something equally gruesome. You’re a little predictable. And a lot tetchy. But I can forgive you for that since you’ve been through some rough times recently, being a S.H.I.E.L.D. prisoner, teleporting across the country, then that... minor altercation... with Thor. Can’t blame you for getting a bit down.”

“Please shut up,” Loki growls into the pillow.

Well there’s an improvement over Loki’s usual temperament. A ‘please’.

“How about this,” says Tony. “I don’t like shutting up. That’s boring. I’m not a boring person, and I hate being bored. So I’ll tell you a fun story instead. Okay? Okay. Yesterday morning
when we first got here and you were in the shower, I decided to, um... calm my nerves by sitting at the table with a nice bottle of scotch.”

Loki groans. “What a fascinating confession. I never would have guessed that of you.”

“Don’t be such a dick. That’s not my story. The interesting part, what I wanted to tell you, is that while I was sitting at the table I started thinking of things. Remembering things. Movies, moments, stuff I used to have or my parents used to have. You know, random old shit from my past. For some reason just started thinking about it. Don’t know why. And then this morning I got up, had breakfast, and started wandering around the house. Wasting time, clearing my head. And I went into one of the bedrooms, purely on a whim, opened up the closet and... There it was. All the stuff I’d been thinking about yesterday. Boxes. Movies. Books. Stuff. My dad’s record case, right there on the closet shelf. Weird, huh? What are the odds that those things would pop into my mind, completely out of the blue, then they’d turn up here right in front of my face? Crazy coincidence.”

The word Loki says sounds a lot like, “Hardly.”

“What?”

And with that, he finally rolls back over to look at Tony. “‘Coincidence’ is a word lesser beings invented to describe the web of connections between all matter in the universe, which their limited brains cannot-” He stops right there, mouth falling open. “What are you wearing?”

Oh right. The tuxedo. Tony kind of forgot about that, though how a white velvet jacket with black satin lapels could slip his mind is a damn good question. “Uh... yeah, I found this in the closet and trying it on seemed like a swell idea at the time. It was my dad’s. He was a little taller than me and not as wide in the shoulders, but it’s an okay fit all considering. Plus you can’t deny the overwhelming fashion appeal. Don’t you think I should integrate it into my permanent wardrobe?”

Loki shakes his head. “Never wear it again.”

Really, it’s not possible to disagree with that statement. Tony shrugs off the jacket. “Yeah, you’re right. I look like an idiot. A vintage ‘70s idiot.”

“Why are you even in here?” Loki asks him. “I’m trying to sleep.”

“Right, right.” He did come in here for a reason. Something before the tuxedo and the coincidences. “I... uh...” (Oh, just stop screwing around and spit it out already...) “I need a favor.”

“Of course you do.” Sitting up, Loki leans back against the headboard. By the looks of things, he’s wearing either his towel or nothing under the blankets, leaving the scar down his chest on prominent display. He crosses his arms the moment he notices Tony’s eyes flick towards it. Tony looks back up. “Pretty good scar you got there.”

Loki doesn’t answer; he just pulls the sheet up to cover his body.

“Hey, no need to hide it. I’m familiar with scars. Getting a heart full of shrapnel doesn’t exactly leave a guy with skin like a baby’s ass. And this thing-” He taps two fingers against the arc reactor, hidden beneath the tuxedo shirt’s ruffles. “-was originally installed courtesy of a makeshift Afghani cave hospital. So there’s a couple, um, rough edges, so to speak. Not as nicely defined as yours. But you know, I think we’re both equally badass when it comes to our scar
stories, which is what really counts. I got exploded by my own tech, you were stabbed by your own brother with your own knife... the ladies love that tragic irony. You’ll be a hit at parties.”

“Stop stalling and ask me your favor,” snarls Loki. “I’d like to refuse quickly so I can go back to sleep.”

“Sorry. Right. Favor.” How come this idea made so much more sense before he actually had to talk to Loki about it? He takes a deep breath. This is starting to seem like one of those ripping-off-the-Band-Aid situations where it’s better to outright say what he needs to say. “I need to go back to New York.”

Loki’s answer is out of his mouth without missing a beat. “No.”

“That wasn’t a question,” says Tony.

“I can infer the question from your statement. The question is, ‘Loki, will you agree to leave for New York immediately, based on this foolish and inexplicable whim I’ve just thrown at you out of nowhere?’ To which I have already answered, ‘No.’ At the moment, I am not inclined to sit in a car for four days.”

Tony nods. “Okay, well, that’s good because...” (Just say it, just say it, just say it, you dumb fuck) “...I’m not inclined to spend four days in a car, either. I need to be in New York tonight.”

The sound that comes out of Loki as he slides back down under the blankets might be a protracted ‘ohhhhh’, or it might be a groan, or it might be a custom-tailored hybrid of both.

“Oh, come on,” says Tony, because seriously, this shouldn’t be a big deal. Or so he likes to tell himself. “You already teleported me from New Jersey to Texas, then in a bunch of zig-zags to explore the Land of Enchantment. It’s not like I’m asking you to do some crazy new thing that isn’t within your repertoire of wizard powers.”

“No, you’re merely asking me to expend those powers – powers which, I might remind you, come at an incredibly high cost – to transport you across the country for reasons you have not seen fit to divulge.”

“Because of my girlfriend,” Tony says, quickly, not even pausing to think about the potential consequences. He tried the roundabout approach, stepping in from the side and avoiding the issue, easing into asking Loki for a favor... which worked about as well as trying to sweet talk a komodo dragon. He should’ve known. He knows now. You can’t jerk around with Loki, because all Loki will do is jerk you right back. That’s what he does. That’s all he does. You want something from Loki? You ask him straight up and hope like hell he’s in a mood to entertain your silly little human desires. “It’s Tuesday. I promised Pepper I’d be back in New York on Tuesday night so we could talk.”

“And you expect me to take you there, just like that?”

“Not expect. Hope. Because we’re such good friends now. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. I wrap up your enchanted knife wound with stolen vet supplies, you teleport me to the opposite corner of the country. That’s what friends do for each other. It’s like a law.”

“I thought you and your girlfriend were at odds?” Loki asks.

“Were at odds,” answers Tony. “Okay, technically still are, but I need to undo that.”

Loki takes a good long while rolling around in bed, stretching, and generally wasting time before
he speaks again. And then, all he says is, “Why?”

“Because I’ve made a terrible mistake. I need to throw myself on the mercy of her French pedicure and beg her to take me back. Otherwise I’m pretty sure I’ll die old and alone, surrounded by hundreds of robots designed for increasingly unsavory purposes. I might turn into an evil genius. I might build a death fortress in the remote wastes of Alaska. You never know. If I’m distraught over being dumped and try to continue my work when I’m mentally fragile... If movies have taught me anything, it’s that all good scientists are just one bad experiment away from becoming supervillains. This is a very real fear for me.”

“Turning evil?” Loki snorts.

“Yeah, I’d rather not go down that road,” says Tony. “I’d probably try to destabilize the government and assassinate the president so I could rule as a crushing dictator from my Alaskan death fortress, holding millions of terrified citizens hostage with hitherto unseen sci-fi weapons technology. In which case, I could make an argument that it is my patriotic duty as an American to get back together with Pepper in order to prevent that scenario. Anything less would be treason.”

“And you think Allegedly Evil Loki will help you because...?”

“Because Allegedly Evil Loki is actually a nice guy who’s interested in giving his pal Reluctantly Evil Tony a hand to turn his life around?”

“You have a unique interpretation of reality,” Loki says with a yawn. “And yet with all these words and excuses, I’ve yet to hear a single valid argument addressing the question of why I should use all that power, and, subsequently, how I might be able to rebalance it. Had you thought about that?”

“In fact, I had,” says Tony. And he had. Briefly. In a disturbed sort of way. “And I was thinking... you haven’t used nearly as much magic as you had back in Atlantic City. You’re not all pale and shaky like you were then, and...” He leans forward to poke Loki in the arm. “Hey, look at that. I can still touch you without turning into a drooling moron. So you can’t be too close to your magic saturation limit yet. A one-way trip to New York shouldn’t be too much trouble. Then you just lie low for a couple days until your magic resets itself or whatever Thor said happens, however that works, and everything’ll be good. See? I thought it through.”

Loki hums like he’s considering what Tony said, except he looks too happy with that creepy smile on his face, which can only mean he’s bullshitting and about to say, “Mm... no. Sorry. I dislike that plan. It’s indefinite. I like definite things. Meticulous schedules. Strict routines. I like knowing.”

Loki also looks way too happy when he says that last word, which might make Tony feel just the slightest bit dirty. Tony coughs. “I don’t. At least not in the sense you’re implying.”

“It’s your choice,” Loki says with a shrug. “The offer I presented you back at the inn in Texas is still in effect. Everything has a cost. You know what that cost is. If you don’t agree to my terms, then I’m afraid I cannot help you.”

In Tony’s mind, this conversation had gone so differently. In his mind, Loki was a lot easier to convince. Oh, wishful thinking. “I guess I was hoping we could work out some other terms,” he says, trying not to sound too pessimistic.

“No. My rules are absolute, Tony Stark.”
“Only a Sith deals in absolutes, Loki.”

“I hardly think my price is unreasonable.”

“Maybe not to you, but it’s a pretty big conflict of interest for my purposes. If I’m trying to patch up my relationship, I can’t have you in there literally fucking things up. What happens when I spend hours with her working through all our problems, only to turn around and say, ‘Okay great, honey, our cherished monogamous commitment starts right after I mess around with this guy for fifteen minutes’? Not an awesome plan.”

“Hm.” Loki nods. And Tony nod in return, because for some dumb reason he actually thinks they’re on the same page for once. But then Loki says, “Fifteen minutes is far too small a timeframe. I would set aside at least three hours.”

“...Right,” says Tony. “Well, that’s flatteringly optimistic of you, but my answer’s still ‘no’.”

Loki smiles, just barely showing his teeth. “And so is mine.”

It takes a lot of effort for Tony not to groan in frustration as he drops his head down into his hands, massaging his temples, but somehow he manages. "Loki… please.” He glances up. Loki’s eyes are already on him, flat and guarded. "Just gimme a break. I know you’re a Grinch and your heart is two sizes too small and you'd probably jump at the opportunity to steal Christmas if it came in a small cubic shape and had intergalactic warp powers, but I am asking – begging – you to step back and find that one tattered remnant of a warm, fuzzy place inside your soul that still cares about other people. Please. Please do this one favor for me. I will sing the Fah-Who-Something song if you want me to, I will buy a roast beast for you to carve, or even an unroasted one if you like that better… just please. Help me. I need to get to New York. Please. I need this. I really, really need this.”

"And so do I," Loki softly replies. "I really, really do. That is the rule.” He rolls over onto his front again, half hiding his face in the pillow, and closes his eyes. "I also need to sleep. Come back once you're ready to accept my terms. Until then, I'm afraid I can do nothing."

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Tony folds like the proverbial cheap suit at 2:52 pm while sitting at the kitchen table watching the hands of the clock tick on by.

5:52 pm in New York. Pepper will be home any minute. I need to get there now. Now. Now. Shit. I need to get there now.

Sometimes he wishes he didn’t have such an obsessive personality, but the sad fact is he’s always been the kind of guy who runs on instant gratification. If he wants something, he wants it five minutes ago. And that stupid something, whatever it happens to be, fills every available inch of thought and crowds out all else. If he wants something, he needs it. Needs it. Can’t concentrate on anything else until he has it.

I need to get to New York. I need to see Pepper. I need to get to New York. Right now. New York.

The words pulse through his head as he pushes open the bedroom door, crosses the room, and slams a piece of paper and a pen down on the nightstand next to Loki.

“Okay, Scotty, here’s what’s going down. You are going to beam me to New York. Right the hell now. I will agree to certain conditions as outlined on this paper, which, upon signature, will be considered legally binding despite the fact that I wrote it on the back of a phone bill. Read it. Sign
the bottom. Then we’re out of here.”

Chances are Loki’s being slow on purpose just to piss Tony off as he lazily sits up, stretches, yawns, rubs his face, and goes through the whole spectrum of other time-wasting gestures before finally picking up the paper. The first thing out of his mouth in response is, “You have terrible penmanship.”

“Fuck you.”

“Isn’t that exactly what you’re agreeing to do by way of this document?” he asks with a smirk.

“I mean go fuck yourself. Also read points two and three very carefully.”

“Hmm.” Scanning the page, Loki’s eyes dart from line to line. One eyebrow rises and his mouth tightens, turning down at the corners.

“And before you start bitching about anything,” says Tony, “this is my final offer.”

Loki looks up. “Expand on point three. Where you have written ‘in the absence of any suitable candidate’, please clarify the means by which suitability is determined?”

“That would have to be a mutual decision,” Tony replies.

“No,” Loki says with a shake of the head. “I think I’ll have to demand full control over that decision.”

“Nice try, but that gives you unreasonable veto power.”

“Which by all rights you should agree is fair under that particular circumstance.” He picks up the pen, scribbles down a few words, and hands the paper back to Tony.

The God of Assholes has annoyingly neat printing for something written against his hand on the back of a crumpled phone bill:

...in the absence of any suitable candidate, as determined by Loki...

“Fine,” growls Tony. He grabs the pen out of Loki’s hand, initials the amendment, and thrusts the paper back towards Loki. “Now sign it.”

“Your wish is my command. Do we require a witness to our legally binding agreement?”

“No way. The fewer witnesses the better, with the ideal number hovering around exactly zero. Nobody knows. Ever. As per the confidentiality clause in point five.”

“Oh, Tony Stark, you do worry so...” Loki murmurs, swirling the pen across the bottom of the page in an elaborate signature. “Honestly, who on Earth would I tell?”

“I don’t know, you might brag to some of your weird alien buddies over weird alien drinks?”

“I said ‘who on Earth’. And the answer to that is ‘nobody’. There is nobody in this petty little realm I would ever care to tell, and any of my acquaintances outside this realm would certainly not care to hear. Your secret is safe.”

“You told me about you and Barton,” grumbles Tony.

“Yes, well, Agent Barton did not have the foresight to ask me to sign a contract with a
Tony snatches the contract back, hissing a frustrated breath out through his teeth as he scrawls his own signature next to Loki’s and prints the date beneath it. “Something tells me Agent Barton was unable to ask you for a lot of things. But somebody else can ream you out for that another time. Right now, we gotta move. I’m going to get changed. You get dressed. In real clothes this time, none of that illusion bullshit, since those seem to disintegrate too easily and there’s no way in hell I’m letting you walk around in front of Pepper in a towel. I don’t care what you wear, as long as it’s classified as clothes. Go. We leave in ten minutes.”

“Will you bring me a juice box?” Loki calls after him as he reaches the door.

“When we get to New York,” he promises.

And that’s that. The contract may be signed in blue Bic ink rather than blood, but even so he can’t help feel, as he peels off the ruffled tuxedo shirt and pulls on a gray hoodie, that he’s made some kind of deal with the devil. Something that may just end with the ground opening up beneath his feet and swallowing him whole. Probably metaphorically, but if Loki’s in a theatrical mood... you never really know.

It’s going to take one hell of a fiddle contest to weasel his way out of this.
Chapter Summary

Back in New York, Tony chats up the ladies while Loki appears out of, and then disappears into, thin air. A peace offering appears in the form of a dragon of drunkenness.

Chapter Notes

I think I need to apologize for two things in this chapter. One, it was written in panic and haste after I decided I hated my original draft enough to ditch it and start again from scratch, going in a whole new direction. Obviously I don't even know what I'm doing any more. Two, as a side-effect of point one, Loki turned into an absentee character in this chapter.

Nonetheless, I hope it's okay, and everyone who's still reading and enjoying this story has my complete gratitude. :)

Even with his eyes closed, Tony knows they've arrived. He knows that scent. Leather furniture. Air conditioning. New carpet. A hint of recently varnished wood and fresh grout. It fills his head as he draws in breath after greedy breath and sinks down to kneel on the smooth slate floor. He knows that gorgeously familiar scent. And right now, it's the most comforting scent in the world.

Jarvis' voice ringing in his ears might just be the most comforting sound in the world. “Welcome home, sir.” Home. He's home. A week and a half as a fugitive feels like years, but he's finally back in a place where he belongs. He could bend over right now and kiss the floor.

He settles for placing his hands down flat on the cool stone and dropping his head in a silent moment of thanks. The unpleasant side effects of long-distance teleportation still churn in his stomach and buzz under his skin. And if the unhappy noise at his side is anything to go by, whining its way down into a crouch, Loki feels the same way.

“It’s good to be home, Jarv,” he says after a few deep breaths, which don’t help at all. “Is Pepper back from L.A. yet?”

His question is answered by a dull thud somewhere off to his right (if he concentrates he can recognize it exactly: that’s a purse being dropped to the floor and is also, strangely, a very comforting sound) followed by his name spoken in an incredulous female voice. “Tony?!”

So much for making a quiet and unobtrusive entrance. With a groan, Tony pulls himself back up to his feet, trying not to wobble too much on dangerously shaky knees. “Hey honey,” he manages, though his teeth are clenched against the growing wave of nausea. “I’m, um... yeah. That classic line and stuff.”

Pepper, to her credit, looks as perfect as always in a pale gray tailored suit and bright green blouse.
Hair pulled simply and elegantly back from her face. Lips glossy pink. Deer-in-the-headlights expression on her face as she slowly walks across the room towards him, but not even that’s enough to detract from the overall impression. Fuck, she’s beautiful.

“Tony,” is all she can seem to say. And Tony, who’s pretty sure that if he had a mirror handy he’d see only an incoherent and unprepared half-smile splashed across his own face, can seem to say nothing at all.

She manages to break the stunned silence first, clearing her throat. “What... what are you doing here?”

“It’s Tuesday,” he answers, and feels stupid as he does, because son of a bitch, shouldn’t he be able to think of something better to say? Something dazzling, something witty, something worthy of winning back a girlfriend? “I... You told me you’d be back on Tuesday, and we were going to talk.”

“I mean, what did... where did you come from?”

“Uh... Phoenix?”

“No, that’s not...” She drops her head into her hands, covering her face and rubbing her eyes, exhaling a long, troubled breath. “You just... appeared... out of nowhere, in the middle of the room, and... At least I think you did? Did you just...?” She looks up. “What did you just do?”

“Don’t panic,” says Tony. “I can explain. Sort of. It’s a long story.”

“No, Tony, a ‘long story’ is what happens when you total your car or... or... when you get a bad tattoo. This is... You just suddenly appeared out of thin air. Is it some new science thing? That you didn’t tell me about? Is this what you’ve been working on with S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Not exactly...”

The mistake he makes is looking at Loki, because the second his gaze darts down that way, Pepper’s follows. In all fairness she would’ve noticed eventually, since not even the shock of seeing one person teleport into the living room can distract somebody from the fact that it was actually two people who teleported into the living room. But it would’ve been nice to have a couple more seconds to try to explain things before bringing a chaotic space wizard into the equation. Especially when the chaotic space wizard is lying flat on his back on the floor with his eyes squeezed shut, looking pale and sickly like he’s about to vomit.

“...Who is that?”

“That would be the long story,” Tony replies. “Actually, did I say ‘long story’? I meant ‘totally nonsensical story’.”

But from the spark of alarm in her eyes and the shrill edge to her voice, she already knows exactly who that is. “Last week, when Phil stopped by, and brought you those notes, with those videos... That’s... that’s the... Loki.”

“Yes,” Tony confirms. “That’s the Loki. But for now, you can just ignore the Loki. He's going to hang out here, not doing anything, while you and I have a talk. Okay?”

“No, that’s not okay, that’s... Tony, what’s he doing here?! With you? And why is he wearing...” She blink. Once. Twice. As if processing the sight of Loki’s off-white linen suit and dark green western tie takes a lot of extra effort on top of the massive amount of effort it’s already
taking just to process the sight of Loki at all. “Is that one of your dad’s old suits?!”

“My clothes were confiscated by the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Loki explains, finally deciding to speak, though his eyes stay closed and he makes no move to get up off the floor. “Tony Stark has been kind enough to lend me some of his.”

“I don’t understand,” Pepper whispers, shaking her head.

“It’s my fault,” says Tony. “I told him he could wear whatever he wanted, and he chose that. I’m assuming out of spite, because I can’t think of any other reason why somebody would want to look like Vincent Vega dressed as Colonel Sanders, but…” He shrugs. “What can you do?”

“No, I don’t… I don’t understand why…” Her voice trails off into mute confusion.

No, Pepper doesn’t understand. Any of it. That much is obvious from the way she stares, eyes jumping from Tony to Loki and back again, standing with her arms crossed protectively across her chest, radiating nothing but nerves. Tony rakes his hands back through his hair. Maybe if he clenches his fists and pulls hard that’ll somehow clear his head and help him concentrate over the storm in his stomach. (It doesn’t.) Think. He needs to think. He needs his brain to stop rearranging itself so he can work this through.

“Look,” he says, stepping up to rest his hand on her arm. She flinches away. Shit. “…Alright, so this is obviously not getting off to the spectacular start I hoped it would. But if you just give me some time, I can explain everything. Where I’ve been, the sudden appearance, Loki, even the suit. Pepper? Baby? Just give me a chance, I swear I can explain it all. Please.”

His words snap her out of whatever trance of disbelief she’d fallen into over Loki and the teleportation “No.” Yet another ‘no’. “No, Tony, I can’t even think about... I don’t want to think about it, I don’t want to know, I don’t think I can know. I need to go. I need to get ready. I have a dinner meeting in two hours with some of the senior board members, I have things I need to do, I have my job I need to do. I have…” She gives her head a quick shake, staggering back to put an arm’s length of distance between her and Tony: two more steps, heels clicking hard against the floor. But then her arms drop down heavily at her sides. And her face crumples, losing all sense of composure. Right there. Right where she stands. Everything falls apart.

“I…” she says, voice cracking between sound and silence. “What’s even happening here?”

One second is all it takes for Tony to close the gap between them. He wraps his arm around her back and pulls her into a tight embrace; she puts up only a token struggle before sagging heavily against his shoulder. Her breath hitches, she gulps in a mouthful of air, and then her head sinks down and he can rest his cheek against her hair.

“It’s okay, baby, everything’s going to be okay,” he whispers, inhaling the perfume that clings to her skin. (Home.) “I promise. Let’s find somewhere quiet and sit down and talk this through. It’s going to be okay.”

“Oh…” she echoes back, and nods just the tiniest bit.

There’s a bottle of port on a shelf in the office. Tony steers Pepper inside, sits her down on one of the stiff new leather chairs, and shuts the door before pouring two glasses. Pepper takes both and downs them in quick succession. Tony wordlessly pours her more.

Then one for himself, twirling the glass awkwardly in his hand as he thinks of what he can even say to her. “Pepper… I just want to start off by saying how sorry I am. About this, about
everything, about showing up suddenly like that... I can’t even begin to guess how weird this must be for you.”

“Uh-huh,” she numbly replies.

“It’s weird as hell for me, and I’ve been dealing with it for the past six days.”

“With Loki?”

“Yeah. With Loki.”

“The bad guy S.H.I.E.L.D. hired you to track down and capture.”

Tony nods. “Yeah. But if you think about it, in a way, I have captured him.”

“Tony...” she starts, and there’s a familiar, exasperated warning tone creeping back into her voice. That’s a good sign. The panic’s beginning to subside.

“I should tell you the whole story,” says Tony, sitting down in the chair facing hers. “Let me start at the beginning and maybe that’ll answer a few things. If I don’t do that, nothing will make sense. I mean, it’s still not going to make sense, but maybe if I tell you all the background it’ll be a little easier to understand.”

So that’s what he does. He starts at the beginning, with that fateful night in Stuttgart when S.H.I.E.L.D. took Loki into custody. Thor’s arrival. Loki’s cell. The tortures. The inconvenient uprising of conscience, the chat with Thor, the escape, and hiding out in Atlantic City. He leaves out the part about Loki’s inert magic and glosses over the exact reason for Thor and Loki’s fight in Texas, but otherwise sticks to the truth. Right up to the decision to return to New York (minus the contract). It takes nearly fifteen minutes for it all to come out, and by the end Pepper’s finished her fourth glass of port and is staring at him with an unnervingly calm expression, eyes giving away no hint of emotion.

“Which brings us to now,” he says. “Um.” Which is a really shitty ending to the story, but what else is there to say after just having told your girlfriend that magical aliens are real and are trying to take over the planet?

Pepper nods. “And now Loki is here with you. And he’s just going to... lie in the middle of the floor.”

“Yeah, teleportation isn’t a good way to travel. Imagine seasickness multiplied by stomach flu plus a suit made of bees, while riding on a roller coaster. Speaking of which...” He shifts his chair closer until their knees are just touching. “Can we take a break and talk about something normal for a sec? How was Disneyland?”

“Fine,” Pepper answers, still cool and distant. “We went on rides. We took pictures. Last night we all had too much wine and Tracey lost one of her shoes on Soarin’ Over California. But that’s the craziest thing that happened, which makes my story a distant second to yours, and Tony, please don’t try to change the subject. You’re telling me all these things that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to understand, magic and legends and powerful beings from outer space...” Thinning her lips, she shakes her head. “It’ll take a while for that to sink in. It’s just... It’s too weird.”

“I know,” says Tony. “Pepper, honey, believe me, I know. And that’s kind of why I’m here. I’ve been on the run from S.H.I.E.L.D. since Wednesday, hopping from one place to another, experiencing a whole lot of insane shit I didn’t even know was possible... and it’s forced me to step back and think about what’s important in my life. What I want. It’s shown me, without a doubt,
that what I don’t want in my life is... all that. I thought I did. I thought I’d found my calling as Iron Man, being a big hero, saving the world, but now the world has stepped up to show me what I’ll be up against if I stay in the game, and I don’t think I can do it. I’m not a superhero. This past week has made that very clear. I’m just a guy who builds robots. I take on terrorists and war criminals and mad scientists because they’re all human, just people, but now we have super soldiers and radiation mutants and intergalactic demigods in the mix and I’m so out of my league it isn’t even funny any more...”

He sighs. “I want to go back to a normal life. I want to wake up in the morning secure in my knowledge that nobody’s going to try to kill me. I want to be able to say that the weirdest thing I saw on any given day was a man rollerblading in a bright orange Speedo. I want to go on vacations to somewhere tropical where I can drink piña coladas until I get sick and not worry about anything except sunscreen. That’s what I want. A normal life. With you. Just a normal life like everybody else has, and I want you with me.”

The way she stares back at him doesn’t instill a whole lot of confidence that this conversation is going well. “You want a normal life?” she asks, quietly incredulous. “As in... two kids and a dog normal?”

“Well, uh, no, I hadn’t really thought of ‘normal’ in those terms, but if that’s what you really want I could possibly be persuaded to buy a painting of two kids and a dog. Preferably abstract. Or, even better, sponsor some needy kids and dogs in Africa.” He smiles at her, trying to provoke any kind of positive response, but there’s nothing coming. “No, I mean normal as in going to visit your mom in Tampa for Thanksgiving,” he explains. “That’s how serious I am. I am actually willing to go to Florida with you. Maybe even more than once.”

“Okay,” she says. And nothing more.

Tony can feel his stomach twist, and it has nothing to do with the lingering teleportation nausea. It’s all going wrong. It’s not supposed to be this way. She’s supposed to break down in tears of joy at his confession, falling into his arms, saying that she’s waited so long for him to realize she’s the one he wants to settle down and spend the rest of his life with. And they live happily ever after. That’s what’s supposed to happen. He draws in a hesitant breath, leaning forward to take her hand in his. She doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t do anything else either. No reassuring squeeze.

“Pepper... I know things haven’t been the best lately. I know I’ve acted like a real asshole at times. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. That’s not the person I want to be, and that’s not the life I want to have. I want to start over. Do things right. We had a good thing going for a while and if we work at-”

“Just stop,” she says suddenly. She jerks her hand away to hold it up between them, palm out as a barrier. “Before you go any further, I think it’s my turn to say a couple things.”

“I hope they’re good things?” he asks, trying to force another smile, though this one feels tight and awkward and all wrong. He lets it fall. She’s not looking at him anyway.

Pepper starts slowly. “You say you want a normal life. You say you want boring vacations and predictable day to day living, but Tony, I know you. That’ll last for a week. Maybe a month. You’re incapable of doing the same thing for more than a few days at a time before you get bored and move on to the next bigger and better thrill. So maybe you want ‘normal’ right now, but what happens after we wake up and have breakfast without worrying about dying, and after we drink piña coladas with my mom in Florida, and after you lose interest? What happens when you start thinking about building new armor and weapons that can take on the aliens and put you on the
same level as people like Loki and Thor?"

“This time it’s different,” he says, taking her hand again.

“But it’s not different! This sudden desire for a normal life is just another one of your projects! When you have it, it’ll be done, and then you’ll want something new. It happens every time! You said you don’t want certain things in your life any more, and that’s the only part of this whole conversation I understand, because... I don’t want this any more.”

His whole body tenses at those words. All of it, entirely, down to the last little muscle. Legs stiffen, pressing his feet down hard into the floor. Back and shoulders clench, making his spine burn. Left hand tightens around the cut crystal stem of the port glass. Ready to snap its delicate neck. He’ll crush his own bones instead. “Then what do you want?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” she replies. There’s real regret in her voice this time. He can hear it. He’d probably be able to see it in her eyes, too, if only she’d stop staring at her knees long enough to look at him. “I guess I’ve never had time to figure that out. I just know I don’t want... this.”

“And ‘this’ is...?”

“This. Everything. The uncertainty, the chaos, worrying, never knowing... It was bad enough when I was just your assistant and had to keep track of a million and one appointments that you never made even the slightest effort to reach on time, but now I have to keep track of you. When I’m not worrying myself sick over your company, I’m worrying about you. Where are you? What are you doing? Why aren’t you keeping any of your promises? Do you even care about being with me? Are you ever considering about how I might feel? Am I holding you back? That’s what I don’t want. I don’t want the stress. I don’t want to lie in bed every night waiting for you, falling asleep alone and angry and frustrated, only to have you wake me up three hours later to tell me about this amazing new thing you just did that couldn’t wait until morning. That's not me. It's not who I am. It's not the life I want.”

“But that’s what’s going to change,” he says. “No more stress and chaos.”

“Tony, you are stress and chaos,” she sighs. “It’s why people adore you: you’re exciting and unpredictable and impossible to pin down and live this insane, fast-paced, glamorous life that boring little people like me can only dream about.”

“Excuse me, what? Since when are you a boring little person? You’ve been living that glamorous life with me for years.”

And now she finally looks up. A sad smile sits on her lips as she speaks. “No. I lived it with you for one year. Before that I lived it beside you or behind you or in an office down the hall from you. That’s different. And the one year of living with you showed me why boring little people like me only dream about your life instead of going out there to get it. I can’t do this. I thought I could. I did. I tried. I really...” Her hands flutter up to her mouth, then to her cheeks, then down to her neck, like they can’t decide where they want to be. And she can’t decide what she wants to say. “I also want a normal life. But I think... my version of normal is pretty different from yours. There’s not a lot of overlap. So I can be your employee. I can be your CEO. I can be your friend.”

She stops short of saying what she can’t be as she stands up, gives his shoulder a quick, sympathetic touch, and walks to the door.
Stunned, he stares after her. “And that’s... that’s it? That’s all? That’s all I get? A vague brush-off and a cliché line about you wanting to still be friends?”

“We’re both intelligent, grown-up professionals, Tony,” she says. “Can’t we just leave it here? End things on a calm note? Be civil to each other? I don’t feel like screaming at you, or crying any more than I’ve already done this week. This is good for me. Right here. I’d really like to be able walk out of this room without hating you.”

“No. No, sorry, no, this isn’t good.” It’s wrong. It’s all wrong. It’s all unraveling. Incomplete. And he’s grasping at straws, but... “There’s more to this. I’m not done.”

“Well. I am.”

Her jaw tightens. She turns away. Concentrates on the door handle, tracing its contour with her fingertip, and when she speaks again it’s in a different voice, from a distance. “I need to go. I need to meet the board members for dinner.”

“Will you be back later? Can we at least continue this discussion tonight, or tomorrow?” One more desperate line thrown out. Anything for a sliver of hope.

“I don’t think so.”

Those are her last words before leaving. Nothing dramatic, nothing memorable. Not even a standard ‘goodbye’. Not even a look over her shoulder. She walks out on the same note of anticlimactic incompleteness that ended their conversation, shutting the door behind her.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

The port bottle is smooth and comfortingly cool in Tony's hand, and against the fire in his neck and his cheek and his forehead. He pours the rest into Pepper's glass, into the crimson quarter-inch she left behind. One tiny remnant of a connection with something that had once been hers. His mouth covers the smudge of her lipstick.

The pain of loss has always manifested itself in his body as a physical feeling. Ever since he can remember. It’s a tight ache just above his stomach, a lot like hunger, even though nothing could be more unappealing in this moment than the thought of food. He waters it down and loosens the knot with drink instead. As always.

It really wasn't supposed to happen this way. She was supposed to...

When he finally scrapes together the courage to open the door and leave the office, Pepper is long gone.

Loki is nowhere to be seen.

ooo

He’s been this drunk before. It’s nothing new: staggering, fall-down, blackout drunk. His last clear memory is grabbing a bottle of Crown Royal from the bar. After that, things happen in strobing snippets. A view of the skyline. Hanging his head down over the back of a chair, staring at the ceiling. Crawling up the stairs. Trying to pull off his clothes and struggling with shoes. Watching a thin trickle of vomit swirl down the shower drain while water stings his eyes.

Somehow he ends up in bed, and maybe he falls asleep. That’s difficult to say. All he knows is that the last time he looked at a clock it was 8:04, and now it’s 12:21, and somebody’s turning on
the lights. The blurry shape of a woman stands in the doorway.

His heart lurches in his chest. “...Pepper?”

And it falls. “Sorry, no. Guess again.”

She walks forward, and Tony squints against the bright light to make out any features on the dark, female-shaped blur. Wait, no, that dark female shape is a feature. A form-fitting black catsuit.

“Natasha?”

She sits down on his bedside table with a smile. “The one and only.”

He should really be terrified to see her, but alcohol has this magical way of latching onto any emotion, draining its power, and diluting it down to apathy. All he can manage is bland disappointment. He can be terrified sometime in the future. When he’s done being drunk. Which will hopefully be never. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I come bearing a peace offering.” And she pulls out something from behind her back that looks like...

“A ceramic dragon?”

“Unscrew the head,” she says as she hands it to him. “Sorry, it was all we could get on short notice. Coulson bought it in Bangkok three years ago and it’s been sitting in his desk ever since. The label says ‘whisky’, but I think you’re looking at genuine Thai moonshine.”

Tony takes a swig, gagging when the taste hits his tongue. “Yeah that’s... fuck, that’s not whisky.”

“You want me to find you something else?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t drink it.” The second mouthful is even worse than the first. Jesus Christ. “So is this S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new plan to get rid of me? Let me drink myself into an early grave? ’Cause you know what... I’m feeling just shitty enough to do it.”

“No. We’ll stop you before alcohol poisoning sets in. Right now, we just need to keep you sedated and cooperative. This is the easiest way for both of us.”

And that should probably be insulting. Or ominous. But... sure, why not. “In that case, can you bring me something from the bar downstairs? Anything. I don’t care. My drunk is starting to wear off.”

“You’re still very drunk, Stark,” says Natasha.

“Yeah but I can almost coherent a sentence.” He lifts up the dragon. He really needs to stop drinking this swill. Right after this sip.

She gives him a condescending pat on the head before standing up. “I’ll find you something.”

“Thanks.”

“And you might want to put on some pajamas.”

“Why? What am I wearing now?” One glance down answers that question. “Aw hell. I forgot I had a shower.”
“You passed out in the shower.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize to me. I’ve seen worse. Rogers was the one who had to carry you to bed, though, and he’s not very impressed with you right now.”

“So the gang’s all here,” Tony says, an assumption rather than an outright question. He should probably have an opinion about that, too. Fear. Anger. Confusion. Amusement. Anything. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents have invaded his private property, yet all he can feel is a lazy sort of contentment because they paid him off with a dragon full of moonshine.

“It’s a good location,” she answers with flippant little shrug, also completely content with the idea of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents invading Tony Stark’s private property. “Anyway, I need to check on a few things, but I’ll be back in about an hour with your drinks. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“You’re my official babysitter?”

Natasha’s smile is completely empty of warmth. “For the time being.”

“How much time will that be?”

“Until we find Loki.”

Loki.

Somehow that one word manages to slide past the barrier of alcoholic apathy and jolt him right below the ribs. “Loki,” he repeats. “He’s not here...”

“He’s not in the building,” Natasha confirms. “But we have reason to believe he soon will be.”

Tony laughs. Well, he tries to. It’s so damn hard to be deceptive when you’re too drunk to see straight. “If you think he’ll come back to get me that’s... that’s stupid.”

All she has to do is shrug and a bad feeling starts to creep down Tony's back. She knows something. “Thor seems to think he will.”

He almost drops the dragon. “Thor.”

“Like I said, it’s one big Avengers party downstairs. Thor, Rogers, Banner, Barton...” Her mouth twitches with some unknowable emotion when she says that name. “If you cooperate and help us capture Loki-” (and she hisses in obvious disgust when she says that name) “-maybe we’ll let you back in the club.”

“But Thor’s not... injured... or...”

“Not that I’m aware of,” she says with a frown. “Why?”

Impossible. He saw... Down goes a swig of moonshine. “Nothing. Don’t listen to me. I’m drunk. Go party it up with your Avengers.” He waits until she reaches the door before adding, “But, Natasha?”

“Hm?”

“If Loki does come back, which he won’t, because that’s stupid, and you won’t be able to catch him anyway, but if he comes back?”
“Yes, Stark?”

“He’s... not really a bad person. He’s the God of Assholes and world’s – the universe’s – biggest fucker and I’m sure ninety percent of everything he does is just to piss people off, but he’s not all bad. You can reason with him. He’ll pretend you can’t, but you can. He just wants you to play his games and he wants to screw you around.”

“You call murdering eighty people, obliterating a S.H.I.E.L.D. research center, and threatening to destroy human civilization ‘screwing around’?” she shoots back at him.

“By Asgard logic, I think, yeah. Those guys are the Lady Gagas of warfare.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It did in my head. Sorry. But Natasha-”

“Stark.” She cuts him off with one of those ‘zip it’ hand gestures. “When we get Loki, you will be involved. I don’t know why, and I don’t care why, but if you’re the one person who can get through to him, we’ll use that. Satisfied?”

Nodding, he throws back another swig of the dragon. “Thanks.”

“Now try to get some rest. I’ll be back soon to check in and bring you something better to drink. You don’t have to finish that.”

“It’s growing on me.” Or at least it’s burning away his sense of taste while making his head nicely hazy.

Natasha pulls the door shut behind her with a click and a series of beeps. So S.H.I.E.L.D. has spruced up the door with a fancy new lock, which is... well, honestly Tony doesn’t give a shit at the moment. Maybe he’ll be able to scrounge up a shit to give later, but probably not, because later he plans on still being drunk. He takes one more pull from the dragon (how is it half empty already?), sets it on the table within easy groping distance, and buries his face in his pillow. His head is so heavy. It spins. But his body floats, rising weightless, feet first. What a nice feeling...

He dreams of a riverbank full of ghosts only to wake, suddenly, with a ghost of his own standing there beside the bed. Groggily, he rolls onto his back. Somebody turned the lights off. A shadow is all he can see in the sparse moonlight. A shadow and a blur of pale white skin.

"Nnntashnn?" he mumbles.

The ghost sinks down to kneel at his side.

"Oh, Tony Stark," it whispers in reply. "What have you done to yourself now?”
Chapter Summary

Steve forces Tony to resurrect the pants rule, Natasha acts like a word that's a total cliché, and seriously, those windows on Stark Tower should have been made of something a lot stronger than glass.

Chapter Notes

Loads of thanks to everyone reading and leaving comments and kudos on this story! I really love hearing what you have to say, and any suggestions you might have or guesses at what's coming. :)

And for anyone wondering how long this is going to be, I'm estimating around 22 to 25 chapters in total. We're past the halfway point, but there's a lot left to go...

Captain America brings Tony breakfast in bed. Well, technically, Steve Rogers brings Tony breakfast in bed, dressed in wholesome farm boy clothes rather than the star-spangled spandex. But the end result is the same. Tony gets breakfast in bed. Two hard-boiled eggs, a fruit cup, a bowl of oatmeal, and a thermos of what smells like some very Irish coffee.

“'You know,” Tony says as he pours out a mug, “considering the amount of booze in this coffee, wouldn’t you agree that my health is already down the shitter and I should be able to have some bacon?”

“Everyone gets the same breakfast, Stark,” Steve answers in that tone people tend to use when talking to complete morons. “S.H.I.E.L.D. standard rations.”

“Really? S.H.I.E.L.D. gives you all this much liquor so early in the day? I had a hunch working for them would be stressful, but Cap, come on. That’s not the American way.”

Immediately on the defensive, Steve snaps back at him. “We get orange juice or milk! Only you get...” A grunt of disgust replaces any actual words.

“Only I get the good stuff,” Tony agrees with a nod. “The perks of being an independent contractor rather than an employee.”

Steve doesn’t reply. He just clenches his fists, tightens that heroic jaw, and stares down at Tony with a look that miraculously manages to combine utter loathing with smug, self-righteous pity.

Typical. Tony takes a sip of the coffee, which, surprisingly, isn’t bad at all. “Well, seeing as I’m not an employee... I want some bacon. Go. Fetch. I got a ten dollar bill with your name on it if you’re back within half an hour. Actually, wasn’t ten dollars a lot of money back in your day? Can I get away with a smaller tip? Five dollars? One?”
“You look like hell, Stark,” says Steve. Going for the low blow instead of thinking up any real comeback. “Just how hung over are you after what you pulled last night?”

“Not hung over at all,” Tony flips back with a dumb smile. “Still drunk. About to get drunker. Romanoff’s orders. I’m supposed to stay sedated and cooperative.”

“Or you could do the right thing, act like a man, and help us. We’re balancing at the edge of a war here. We could use you. You’ve been with Loki for the past week; you have to know a few things about him.”

Ah-ha. So that’s the ploy. And a pretty weak one at that, if Tony can see through it as clear as glass even when his vision’s still fuzzy from all the drinking. He manages to keep a straight face for about four seconds, nodding thoughtfully at Steve’s suggestion, before breaking down in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Steve demands.

“You. You and Natasha. This cute little good cop/bad cop routine. She threatens, makes me think I’m in trouble, you offer salvation if only I repent my sins. Pretty lame. I’ll need a lot more alcohol before I’m drunk enough for that to work.”

“Stark...” Steve sighs.

Tony shakes his head. “No, it’s okay, it’s not your fault. You’re too honest. Too good. Like a Norman Rockwell painting come to life. You’re not cut out for this spy shit. Who put you up to it? Agent Phil? He should’ve come himself. That bland, unassuming demeanor gets me every time.”

“Stark...”

That one sounds a little more pissed off. Grinning, Tony throws back the rest of his cup of coffee before sinking back into bed with a yawn. “I’d ask you to tell me all about your amazing plan for me, but it turns out I don’t care. And my bacon isn’t getting itself.”

“You don’t care,” Steve says quietly.

“No. I don’t.”

“You don’t care about any of this? Anything at all? The Tesseract, the Chitauri, an invasion from outer space? When did you stop acting like a real human being?”

The grin on Tony’s face stays right where it is. Frozen in place. No, he doesn’t care. Not in the least. Not about anything. Not any more. Why the fuck would he want to give two thoughts to the world when his life’s gone to hell in a beat-up, whisky-soaked handbasket? “Dunno,” he answers. “Sometime between 1970 and yesterday evening?”

Steve shakes his head before turning to walk away. He almost makes it out, too. He’s all the way to the door before something changes his mind: something that visibly rolls through him. It slows him down, brings him to a standstill, and makes him retrace his steps back to Tony’s bedside.

“Just so you know?” he mutters, half hissing the words. “I don’t like this. I don’t agree with this. Letting you drink yourself stupid. It’s...” Biting the inside of his cheek, he looks away. “You need to grow up, Stark. This isn’t the way to do it. You need to take responsibility and stand alongside the rest of us.”
Right. ‘Responsibility’. The catch-all word people like to throw around when somebody doesn’t walk the line. “Okay, sure. Thanks for the advice, G.I. Joe. I’ll take it to heart. I really will.

“Stop being a wise-ass and think about it. And for God’s sake, you need to put on some pants.”

“Why?” asks Tony. “I’m in bed. Pants not required. That’s the rule.”

“...The rule.”

“Yeah. The House Pants Rule. Ask Thor. He knows all about it.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Steve sighs as he once again turns to walk away.

“No, really, ask Thor. Go ahead. I dare you.”

Something makes Steve do it. Maybe it’s the cocky smirk Tony shoots him, or the sting of backing down from a challenge, or maybe just a general tendency to want to call people out on their bullshit. Whatever it is, he lifts his hand to his earpiece with another one of those looks of loathing. “Thor? Yeah. Tony Stark says you can tell me something about a... about a pants rule.”

His face sinks into an expression of sudden, sheepish embarrassment the second those words leave his mouth. Tony, trying not to derisively snort too hard at the sight, reaches for the coffee thermos.


“And?” Tony prompts.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Steve looks down at the floor, and a grunt of irritation escapes his lips. “Thor said... that men in America wear pants, and when you get out of bed in the morning you put on pants, and those pants stay on until you go back to bed. Or use the shower.”

“Exactly,” says Tony. “When I get out of bed, I’ll put on pants. But since I’m still in bed right now, no pants required. I’m in total compliance with the rule.”

“You’re hopeless,” Steve mutters.

“Yep, I sure am.”

This time, Steve really does leave. No glance back, no pause in the doorway, no final words of wisdom meant to appeal to Tony’s so-called moral goodness. He just walks out and closes the door behind him.

Little electronic beeps bolt the door and seal Tony inside. All alone again.

He pours another mug of coffee and picks at his breakfast. Eats the fruit cup and one of the eggs. Leaves the oatmeal. He hasn’t eaten that shit since he was four years old and isn’t about to start again. Now if only he could get some goddamn bacon.

“Jarvis?” he calls out.

No answer, though that’s not surprising. Aggravating as fuck that S.H.I.E.L.D.’s screwing around with his stuff, but not the least bit surprising. Assholes.

The rest of the coffee just fits in his mug. It's a start, but he's going to need a lot more alcohol to get through the rest of this day.
In the dream, Loki wears his full-out deep space warlord regalia. Leather, armor, cape, helmet, the whole nine yards. He paces back and forth inside his glass cage aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier, but it’s not the prowling behavior of a prisoner. More like thoughtful meandering. Calm. Patient.

Waiting?

*Loki*, Tony tries to call, but no sound comes out. *Loki... I’m behind you...*

It takes so long to cross the room, struggling through air as thick as tar, pushing forward step by step. Every time he tries to speed up the distance doubles. Every time he reaches out Loki steps further away.

*Loki!*

Carefully, Loki pulls off his helmet, which disintegrates into nothing in his hands. His cape falls away, turning into a puddle of water. Each armor piece he touches becomes smoke. Then he turns, he finally turns, he finally looks, and there’s no distance at all between them. Less than inches.

*Loki.* Tony’s hand rises to Loki’s shoulder and slides around to the back of his neck. Loki’s smaller somehow. Shorter. He’s the same height as Tony now. He says nothing at the touch, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t move, only stares back with wide blue eyes. It’s not his usual look. There’s no judgment, no haughtiness, and no wary defense on his face. He looks so...

Tony lifts his other hand to Loki’s face, letting his fingertips trace the sharp line of Loki’s cheek. His jaw. His chin. The curve of his lower lip. His skin glows as white as a pearl in the cell’s blue light, luminous and inviting.

Not even inches of distance between them now. Tony’s mouth is on Loki’s almost without moving, parting his lips, but only just. It’s a soft kiss. A gentle kiss, on one corner of Loki’s mouth and then the other. On that bright skin. Loki’s eyes flutter closed. Warm breath grazes Tony’s cheek. In sure but delicate movements, Loki’s hands skim the outline of Tony’s body, beginning at his hips and rising up to rest against his collarbone. Palms flat against bare skin. Tony’s shirt has melted away. He can’t remember when, but that doesn’t matter.

Loki’s still dressed. That does matter.

Asgardian clothing comes off slowly. So many buckles and laces and hooks and clasps, up the sides and down the back. So many pieces all intertwined and crisscrossing one over the next. Loki slips out of his coat, then his shirt, baring shoulders and arms. Naked skin pale like ice.

Tony’s arms circle around his waist to pull him close. One body against another. Together, they sink down to the floor, and Tony’s mouth is pressed over Loki’s again. Tongue darting out, grazing Loki’s teeth.

He knows somebody’s watching. More than one somebody. There’s a whole audience out there, on the other side of the glass, in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s detention center. He can’t see their faces, but he knows they’re watching from the shadows. But let them. He can let them watch, anonymously hidden, if they want. He can put on a show.

His lips trace a line down Loki’s neck, down his chest, down over the flat plane of his stomach. White skin shivers beneath the touch. When Tony’s hands close over the rise of his hips, Loki’s
back arches off the floor, but without a sound. He’s gasping in silence. Not even the scratch of his
guernails against the floor makes any noise at all. Without words, without even a breath, he
knows how to beg for more. It’s a wish Tony can easily grant.

He slides down lower. Hands falling to Loki’s thighs, slipping between, easing them apart. No
resistance. Loki is ready and waiting. And wanting. And oh, but Tony wants him too. More than
anything he can remember wanting in a long, long time...

ooo

The door. The goddamn door. That piece of shit beeping lock on the motherfucking door.

It knocks Tony out of the dream and jars him awake just in time to see Natasha enter the bedroom
carrying a lunch tray. He instinctively, if groggily, reaches for a pillow to cover the situation going
on down in his groin. Not that it wouldn’t serve Natasha right to have to see what she interrupted,
but, well, common decency and all that jazz. (Or maybe just force of habit. Which is, to be
honest, way more likely.)

“Lunch is ready,” she says, crossing the room, and that’s a totally disingenuous smile if Tony’s
ever seen one.

He rubs his eyes and swallows a remark about stating the obvious. “Unless you brought me a
steak or a cheeseburger, you can just walk back out right now.”

“Sorry. No. Grilled chicken breast, quinoa salad, lemon rice soup, and a bottle of tequila.”

“Then like I said. Walk on back out.”

No surprise: she ignores him and sets the tray on the bedside table. “Having a good dream?”

The jut of her chin and the line of her sight lead down to the pillow in Tony’s lap. “Uh... yeah.
Second-weirdest sex dream I’ve ever had.”

That doesn’t even earn him a raised eyebrow. “Interesting,” is all she says.

‘Interesting’ might be something of an understatement. He can still see the shimmering glow of
Loki’s skin so clearly, and feel its smooth warmth beneath his touch. As real as any memory.
Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck, he needs to get that out of his head. “Tequila,” he says, holding out one
hand. The other... well, it keeps the pillow firmly in place.

“You want a glass or the whole bottle?”

“Like you need to ask. Whole bottle.”

She doesn’t even hesitate before unscrewing the cap and handing it over. And she doesn’t even
blink as he manages to chug down about three ounces before gag reflex sets in. No, her false little
smile stays right in place; this is exactly what she wants.

“Don’t you want to know about the weirdest one?” Tony asks.

“The which?”

“The weirdest sex dream I’ve ever had.”

“I’m sure I can make an educated guess.”
“King Lear was my costar,” he says.

Okay, *that* at least gets the raised eyebrow and a semi-surprised ‘huh’. “Alright, not my first guess,” she allows.

Tony grins. “I’m full of surprises.”

“Not really. Your actions are cliché and predictable. You feel threatened by my presence and your own lack of control, and try to passive-aggressively fight back by referencing sexuality in an attempt to make me uncomfortable. But it won’t work. You’re not the first guy to try this, or try worse. It’s a common strategy.”

“Right,” says Tony. “I guess it’d also be horribly cliché and predictable if I called you a bitch right now?”

“Very. Same with ‘cunt’, ‘slut’ or ‘whore’.”

“What if I threaten to punch you in the dick?”

“That’s a little better.”

“Okay, let’s run with that. One of these days, when I get my suit back, I am going to punch you in the dick, Agent Romanoff. Official threat, copyright Stark Industries.”

“Just drink your tequila.”

And that he does, forcing it down in wimpy little trickles. It’s terrible stuff. Not dragon terrible, but getting up there. It might be a bad idea, prolonging the experience, but he’s not drunk enough to gulp down any more of it just yet.

“So...” Tony says after a moment. “What’s the word on your hunt for Loki?”

“We’ll let you know once there’s something you need to know.”

“Nothing, then?”

“We’ll let you know.”

Nothing. She has nothing. She’s only trying to make him worry with that cool, locked-down demeanor.

“You’re not going to find him. Just saying. He’s not coming back, and you’re wasting your time.”

“Drink your tequila, Stark.”

He takes a bigger sip. Son of a fuck, it’s getting worse... “Lemme guess,” he says. “Coulson impulse-bought this at the Cancún airport and is now abusing my liver as an easy out for all his bad booze?”

“No. That one’s from a place down the street.”

“Hm. I s’pose that was a dumb guess. Now that I think about it... I can’t imagine Coulson in Cancún. Or in a bathing suit. Or taking a vacation at all, anywhere. Does he take vacations? Does he even have a life outside the office?”

“Drink.”
“Why?” he asks after another swig.

Her perpetual smile slowly fades into blank boredom as she crosses her arms over her chest and leans against the bedside table. “Because you need to finish at least a third of that, and I need to stay here and watch. And since I have better things to do than play nanny over you and your bottle, I’d appreciate it if you got to work.”

“You don’t like me wasting your time?”

“Not really.”

Well, boo hoo.

“How about this,” she tries, stepping up to a new tactic. “As soon as you’re done, I’ll tell you something that may interest you.”

“About—” Loki. But he stops himself before saying that. “...About what?”

“Drink up and I’ll tell you.”

Fine. Okay. There could be worse ways to pry information out of S.H.I.E.L.D, than by getting drunk (drunker) on their dime. At least this way he doesn’t have to crawl out of bed, put on pants, or really do anything at all. “This might take a while,” he mutters as he lifts the bottle. “FYI, for future reference, I hate tequila. Tequila and I have a once-a-year obligatory Cinco de Mayo relationship, and then I buy some decent stuff. Not this donkey piss. If you want to get me drunk faster, bring quality scotch. I can drink that like water.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” says Natasha.

And she will. She’s the kind of girl who remembers those little details. For now, though, Tony can take one for the team and down his tequila. One mouthful at a time. (Christ, that’s nasty.) If he holds his breath as he swallows, he doesn’t really have to taste it. “This one time my pal Rhodey and I went sailing down the Baja peninsula. Went ashore in some little town and this old man offered to sell us the best tequila in the world. He didn’t want American dollars, so we traded for some titty mags and canned soup. Anyway, I don’t know if it was the best tequila in the world or the worst, but after finishing one bottle between us we were drunk as hell and seeing yellow halos around everything.”

“Stark...”

“What? I told you, this’ll take a while. I’m going as fast as I can.”

The one saving grace is that the more time he takes, the more time the alcohol has to soak in, dulling his senses into a good ol’ dizzy stupor. It’s always easier to drink whatever the fuck is in front of you once you’ve reached a certain point of no return, and Tony powers on past that point. By the time he stops to look at his progress, the tequila's half gone. “Now look at that,” he says. “I went over and above, just for you. Proud of me?”

Taking the bottle from his outstretched hand, she nods. “Like a soccer mom.”

“Now you have to tell me the...” What was she supposed to tell him? Something? Did she even say? His memory might be a little fuzzy. “...tell me the thing,” he finishes.

“You should lie down,” she says to him, gently guiding him, hand on his shoulder, to lie back in bed. Fluffing up his pillow and stroking his hair. Like a soccer mom. “You need to sleep for
“Now. Rest up.”

“But tell me the...” he mumbles.

“Shh. I’m telling you now. I’m telling you to relax, get some sleep, because we’ll need you later.”

“For...?”

“To help us. We’ll need your help tonight, Stark. We have Loki in the building.”

ooo

It wasn’t just tequila. It couldn’t have been just tequila. There was something else. Something else that’s now slithering through his veins like a snake, weakening his muscles and constricting his lungs and his brain. He can’t breathe (oh god, can’t breathe, can’t get enough air) and it’s in his head, squeezing thoughts and concentration into panic... It chokes his eyes and his ears. The bedroom’s been reduced to a blur of light, and if he tries to sit up, it knocks him back down with a slap to the face. He can barely lift his head. It’s so heavy; his whole body is so heavy and slow. Refusing to listen to what he tells it to do.

It wasn’t just tequila, it was something else, and that something else is being forced through his body on waves of polluted blood while Loki... while Loki...

His skin burns, every inch of it prickled with icy sweat as sickness blooms in his stomach. Natasha has Loki. S.H.I.E.L.D. has Loki. Somewhere in the building. S.H.I.E.L.D. has Loki, and here Tony is, lying paralyzed in bed like a fucking useless drunk. Unable to move, unable to think, unable to do a single thing but feel the crippling weakness slowly invade every nerve in his body from fingertip to toe.

Not acceptable. He has to do something. As long as he’s alive, he can always do something.

He’s forced to slide his way out of bed, hands first, collapsing to the floor to crawl. He has to beg his arms to move, desperately trying to bend his legs despite their waterlogged refusal. One inch at a time. He can do something. He can drag his sorry ass to the bathroom, spurred on by a growing flame of hatred. Natasha has Loki. S.H.I.E.L.D. has Loki.

Well, not for long, assholes. Not while this guy’s still alive.

Three tries it takes to open the bathroom cupboard, clumsy hands pawing at the knob. He allows himself a smile, though, once he sees what’s inside. S.H.I.E.L.D. obviously didn’t do a very thorough job of checking out their temporary prison before locking him in here. All those beautiful little bottles. The basket of cleaning supplies. Products and appliances. There’s bleach paste and peroxide and isopropanol. Glass cleaner and CLR. Aerosol hairspray. Paper towels. Plastic trash bags. In one drawer, a curling iron and electric toothbrush. Extra batteries. In another, cotton balls and the first box of tampons he’s ever been glad to see in his life. Third drawer: hair pins and elastic bands. Good. He can make use of all this. And he knows there’s a lighter with the bag of weed in the cupboard next to the bathtub if he can just climb up onto the toilet and reach high enough to grab it.

His balance on the toilet is precarious enough to begin with, but add in a whirl of green materializing in the mirror beside him... The shock of that sight sends him falling to the floor to crack his head against the side of the bathtub. He’d probably see stars if he weren’t already messed up as all fuck.

“Loki...”
It has to be a hallucination. Or a ghost. A ghost-hallucination, because that’s Loki standing between the door and the towel rack, and he’s wearing his full armor. Cape and helmet included. Tony screws his eyes shut and rubs his forehead, but it does jack shit to fix anything. Ghost-Loki is still there.

“I’ve been waiting for you for hours,” he says, in such an impatient and matter-of-fact tone.

Yeah. It’s a hallucination. “You’re not real,” Tony groans.

“Why would you think that?” Loki asks. He crosses the bathroom and kneels down at Tony’s side, pulling his helmet off as he does.

“Because... because... you’re all dressed up and in my bathroom instead of wearing my dad’s suit with Natasha where you should be.”

“I promise I am real, Tony Stark.”

His movements are blurred. Too fast or too slow, flickering and jumping, setting his helmet aside in slow motion before his hands leap to rake his hair back at double speed. Then one arm floats down like a feather and rests on Tony’s knee.

There’s an aspect to Loki’s magic that Tony hadn’t considered. He’d never even thought of it, but there it is, preceding the rush of metallic warmth through his body. Withdrawal. It’s easy to see now how much he’s missed this. How much he’s wanted it, how much he’s needed it, how eagerly he’s been waiting for it. How dark he felt in its absence, and how much brighter things are now that the magic is back. It floods over him like the caress of the wind, touching everything at once. Outside. Inside. In his skin, in his blood, even in his thoughts. Maybe in his thoughts most of all. An image pours its way into the forefront of his mind, of glass walls and a pearlized body, waiting to be touched.

Either the magic or the memory of the dream guides his arms around Loki’s neck. He pulls himself up, clinging to the pulse of magic and using Loki as an anchor. Until his face meets the curve of Loki’s chin. If this is a hallucination, it’s perfectly real and strong and solid. He breathes in the smell of leather and oxidized metal and a fleeting hint of coconut.

Maybe not a...

“You’re not a ghost,” Tony whispers. Mouth brushing Loki’s skin. Not ready to pull away just yet.

“Of course I’m not a ghost,” Loki softly replies. Somehow, his hands have found their way to Tony’s shoulders and waist, supporting his weight and keeping him upright. “Why.”

“Sorry. I’m... I’m really fucked up.”

Loki nods. “You do smell fucked up.” He leans back, though only inches; still within the circle of Tony’s arms. The leather of his clothing creaks as he moves.

Black and green and gold. “You got your clothes back.”

“Yes.”

“You were waiting for me.”

“The bathroom is the only place not under video surveillance.”
“But Natasha said...”

“The Romanoff woman deliberately misled you,” Loki tells him. “I am in the building, Thor can sense that, but they by no means have me. She lied to see how you would react.”

Oh, shit. Of course. Of course she'd do that. Of course she'd lie to see what would happen, what he'd say, what he'd give away. To provoke a response and make him do...

He glances down past Loki’s arm to the scattered bottles and batteries on the floor.

...Something stupid.

Loki follows his gaze. “What is all this?”

A mess. It’s just a mess. Two minutes ago in the frenzy of panic it looked a lot more promising, but now... “Uh... I was hoping I’d be able to sober up enough to MacGyver my way out of here,” says Tony. “But now I’m all paranoid and think maybe it’s a setup. If they don’t know where you are, they probably think I do. And that I'd try to warn you or get to you if I thought you were in trouble. Rescue you. Which is... exactly what I was about to do. Son of a bitch.”

He drops his head down onto Loki’s shoulder. Plate armor isn't the world's most comfortable headrest, but who the hell cares. Loki’s hands still tingle against his back, holding him up. He can spare a minute of boneless relaxation in the safe cocoon of Loki’s touch.

“Considering your state, I think I should be the one to do the rescuing today,” says Loki. Probably wise. “You’re the magical prince,” Tony agrees. “I guess rescuing people from towers would be your line of work. Let’s get out of here.”

“Agreed. Stand up.”

“Why?” he asks as Loki pulls him to his feet. “Can’t teleport while sitting?”

The hitch through Loki’s body is small, but it’s there, and it leaves a bad, sinking feeling in Tony’s gut.

“Oh, seriously what now? You lost your power to teleport?”

And that makes Loki pull back all the way, a little scowl sliding into place on his lips.

“Temporarily,” he spits.

“And that means?”

“If I need to explain everything to you-”

“Yeah, you do.” Even though they’d been having such a nice little moment a second ago. Welcome back, God of Assholes.

“The Tesseract!” snarls Loki. “Those fools brought it here, and it interferes with my powers! It’s impossible for me to shift within...” He shakes his head. “...two hundred feet of the wretched thing. It’s like a disruptive magnet, as bad as the Bifrost, and if I try...”

“You’ll end up right on top of it?” Tony guesses.

“Or on the opposite side of the world. As I said: disruptive. You either play with it, or you do not play at all. There are rules.”
“Then how did you get back after you left?”

“I’m fairly good at circumnavigating rules,” he says with a nasty little smile. “I shifted two hundred feet up in the air and fell onto the roof.”

“Oh.” Sure, why not, that makes total sense. “Then... how are we going to get out?”

Slowly, Loki paces past the tub, past the shower, over to the bank of windows on the eastern wall. “Two options. The first requires you to be sober enough for us to fight our way out of here.”

Tony nods. “I can do that.”

“The second requires you to be sober enough to hold my hand.”

“I can do that way more easily.”

“I thought as much.”

“So the plan is?”

“You’re a smart man, Tony Stark,” says Loki. “I’ll let you guess. What would be the opposite of falling into the Tesseract’s radius?”

“Flying up?” And Jesus H. Christ, for one split second his heart soars at the possibility of- “You got my suit,” he breathes. “Please tell me you got my suit. It’s here. The Mark Seven. It’s just downstairs. If we can activate it...”

“Too risky,” Loki replies with a little frown, almost like sympathy. “And that was a good guess, but I was looking for a different answer.”

Damn. So much for that spark of hope.

All Loki needs to do is press down one silver switch and the blinds retract, opening up the room to a wall of glass overlooking the midday skyline. “Come over here. Can you walk?”

He can shuffle. At least for a few steps. Then Loki has to catch him as he teeters forward.

“Sober enough to hold my hand Tony Stark?” he says softly.

Tony laces his fingers through Loki’s, squeezing hard in annoyance. “Yeah, yeah, got it.”

“Try not to let go.”

“Or else?” he asks.

“You’ll die,” Loki answers, squeezing his hand in return.

The opposite of falling into the Tesseract’s magnetic radius, Tony sluggishly realizes, would be falling out of it. And Loki kicking out the window would be a real good indication of exactly how they’re going to accomplish that feat. It shatters into ten thousand glittering fragments, raining down onto the city below, and then Tony’s jerked forward, his feet leave the floor, and the wind hits his face.

If he dies, his last words are going to be, “No Loki fuck I can’t do this without my suit!” followed by a pathetic shout of terror that’s choked down into a moan as blasting air fills his mouth. But he blacks out before learning whether or not this is the dramatic climax to the sci-fi soap opera of his
life.
The Person in Bed

Chapter Summary

After a series of feverish memories or dreams, Tony calls Loki out on his BS. The F-word enjoys liberal usage. Also, Tony is a hopeless romantic (really hopeless), and Loki is way too high class to be seduced by statistical probabilities, contractual obligations, and uninspired Midgardian porn.

Chapter Notes

I should apologize now for the way this chapter ends. Enjoy! :D

And, as always, thank you for reading!

The person lying in bed next to him isn’t Pepper, but it could be, if he pretends.

Pretending is easy in the lingering drunken haze. This person feels like Pepper. Like draping his arm over her waist and hiding his face in the gentle tangles of hair falling down to her shoulders. Like curling up in the intoxicating comfort of her presence, letting it wash through him, feeling the warmth and calm and peace and desire...

He kisses the column of her spine, the side of her neck. Slides his knee between hers and presses up close, body against body, winding together.

“Not now,” she whispers, pulling away.

“I want you,” he mumbles against her skin. “Need you, baby...”

But she slides out of bed and out of reach. Too far to touch. Unable to draw her back, his arm wraps around empty air.

“I want...”

“You don’t want this,” is her gentle reply. “You are still very drunk, Tony Stark. And you would regret it later.”

ooo

When he wakes up in the middle of the night, eyes still blurred, head still reeling, wracked with panic and slick with sweat as he suffocates in the blazing heat of his body, he’s alone. Pepper is gone.

Loki is gone.

ooo
The person sitting down on the bed next to him isn’t Pepper, and he can’t pretend it is, because everything feels wrong, and he’s sick in the pit of his stomach, and the bright blanket of magic has disappeared.

That person slips one hand around the back of his neck, easing him up. The rim of a glass bumps against his lips.

“Drink.”

“What is it?” he asks, words catching in the thickness of his throat.

“Water. You are severely dehydrated, and it’s the only way to flush the drug out of your system.”

“Drug...”

“The agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. drugged you, Tony Stark. You need to drink this.”

Tony drinks the water. He shouldn’t. But he does. He shouldn’t trust anyone, especially not someone who has no magic in his touch, who doesn’t feel safe and comforting, but he does. He drinks everything in the glass.

“Good. Very good. Now rest again, and I’ll be back in an hour with more.”

“Will you bring Pepper with you?” he whispers. “I need to see her...”

That might be a long pause. Or maybe his scrambled head only makes it seem long. “I’m sorry... no. I’m unable to do that.”

“Will you bring Loki?”

The bedframe creaks and the mattress dips as the person sitting next to Tony leans closer. Fingertips trace a ghostly line from his jaw up to his eyelids, as if trying to coax them open. But Tony’s head hurts too much, it whirls too much, and he can’t bear the power of sight just yet.

“Why do you want Loki?”

Tony tries to shake his head; it takes almost more strength than he has. “I don’t know. I just need him to be here. I need him.”

“Then yes,” the voice whispers in his ear. “I will bring Loki.”

ooo

The person in bed with Tony might be Loki. It’s so hard to tell. He has Loki’s hair, and the angular lines of Loki’s face: eyebrow, nose, cheek, chin, all explored by Tony’s shaking hands. A smudge of pale skin can be seen through squinted eyes, glowing blue-white and surreal in the arc reactor’s light. Soft and smooth with the scent of coconut, broken by the ridge of a scar from collarbone down to hip on the left side.

All of that belongs to Loki. Only one thing is missing.

There’s no magic flowing out from his perfect skin and through Tony’s veins. Not even the smallest tremor, when there should be a flood.

“Where’s your magic?” Tony asks, quietly, with his cheek pressed against the familiar line of Loki’s scar.
“No need for you to worry about that,” Loki murmurs in reply.

“But it was there in the tower when you...”

“We are no longer in the tower. All of that is over, and you need to rest.”

“But the magic...”

With a sigh, Loki lifts his hand from Tony’s hip, holding it up in a cup-shaped blur in front of their faces. He conjures a little light into his palm. Bright yellow, like a tiny sun. As its glow becomes stronger, a faint tingle slides from Loki’s body to dissipate like mist over Tony’s skin. The mist disappears the second Loki lets go of his sun. “Satisfied?” he asks. “The magic is still there.”

“But before-”

“I told you not to worry about that.”

Nodding, Tony closes his eyes. He will worry, though, because not enough time has passed, and there’s only one other way to rebalance.

ooo

The first time Tony wakes up with a clear head, the alarm clock on the nightstand says it’s 2:27 pm. But 2:27 pm on which day in which place... that’s the mystery.

He’s still dizzy when he climbs out of bed. It takes a minute to get his bearings, but at least he can stand up now. That’s an improvement. He can stand and he can look around the bedroom, rubbing clouds out of his eyes before they finally focus. It’s the bedroom in Phoenix. He’s back in Phoenix. Everything is just like it was. Clothes on the floor, a towel thrown carelessly over the foot of the bed...

So Loki brought them back here? Or...?

Once he finds his balance, he can walk to the bathroom. Or maybe shuffle would be the more accurate verb to use. Whatever. He just needs to take a piss and gulp some water right from the faucet, and brush his teeth because his mouth tastes like the floor of a dive bar men’s room. His reflection in the mirror as he leans heavily over the sink looks like shit. Real, honest-to-God, no-lie shit, with dark circles under red eyes, sallow gray skin, and a week’s worth of scruffy stubble. He needs a shower and a shave like nobody’s business, but not before he finds out what the hell is going on and why, of all the things that could’ve possibly happened, of all the crazy potential twists and turns fate could have thrown at him, he ended up back here.

He shuffles his way down the hall and into the kitchen. There’s a black-haired figure sitting at the table, positioned like he’s hunched over his food. Wordlessly, Tony sits down across from him. Mushrooms. Loki has a bowl of mushrooms. That weird Asian kind, long and skinny and white. He’s wearing a black suit that can’t be an illusion, because nobody takes off the jacket of an illusion and drapes it over the back of a chair.

The first words out of Tony’s mouth are, “What the fuck, Loki?”

Loki looks up. “To which exact fuck might you be referring?”

“Let’s start with why the fuck are we back in Phoenix?”

“I would have thought you’d like to start with thanking me for saving your life.”
“That’s coming up later on my list of fucks to ask about,” says Tony. “This is just the first one.”

Shrugging, Loki picks up a mushroom between two long fingers, holding it like a cigarette before biting off the tip. “It seemed to me to be the most sensible choice of destination. You needed a safe place to recover, and I needed to shift somewhere I had already been and could easily access.”

Okay. Sure. By Loki standards, that actually makes a lot of sense. One down, dozens more to go. “Fine. Then fuck number two: what day is it?”

“Friday.”

“Shit,” Tony groans. So he was a space cadet for two solid days. Unfortunately, there’s nothing he can do about that. “Number three now. Where did those mushrooms come from?”

“I bought us some food.”

“Where and how?”

Okay. Sure. By Loki standards, that actually makes a lot of sense. One down, dozens more to go. “Fine. Then fuck number two: what day is it?”

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“I bought us some food.”

“Where and how?”

Loki grabs one more mushroom before standing up to fetch a grocery bag from the counter.

“...You went to Whole Foods?”

“Yes, why?”

And Tony can only shake his head in awe at that, because the mental picture of Loki in a supermarket stubbornly refuses to materialize. Too bizarre. “Just... nothing. You went to Whole Foods. Actually went there like a normal person...” He pulls a receipt up from the bottom of the bag. “Yeah. A normal person with normal money. You did pay for this, right?”

“I know how to purchase food, Tony Stark,” Loki answers with a little sneer.

“And you went out and bought that suit, too?”

“Yes, among other things.”

“Jesus Christ.” He lowers his head down slowly to the table, resting against folded arms. How is it possible for this Loki-adventure to keep getting weirder? By all reasonable estimates, they should have reached weirdness saturation when Loki teleported them across the country the first time. Or when he became a she. Or when he and Thor fought in the desert, or when Tony had to patch him up with dog bandages, or when Loki turned into a Frost Giant, or when they jumped out a window on the penthouse level of Stark Tower and miraculously didn’t die.

There’s only one explanation for this.

“Am I dead?” he asks, looking up just enough to make eye contact with Loki. “Since Monday morning I’ve sort of been suspecting that I’m actually dead and in some wacko hell that keeps getting weirder and weirder until I fall into a spiral of insanity. Or else I’m in a coma and all of this is just a dream. Or the S.H.I.E.L.D. drugs haven’t worn off yet and in reality I’m still in New York on a bad trip. So remember when I said ‘what the fuck’? I’m saying it again. What. The. Fuck.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, Tony Stark,” Loki answers, opening the fridge. “You’re confused. And you should eat something; you’ve had no food in over two days. Do you like carrots?”
“No, I don’t want…” He lifts his head only to drop it back down into his waiting hands. “See, this is what I mean. Food. Shopping. Carrots. You being normal isn’t normal.”

“I’m only trying to help you.”

“Exactly!” Tony almost shouts. “And that’s what’s weird! You helping me and buying food and… and not trying to steal the Tesseract! It was right there! You said so: right there in the tower! And you did nothing!”

“I freed you from S.H.I.E.L.D.,” answers Loki in a voice that’s started to pick up a dangerous edge. “I would hardly call that nothing.”

“But why?! You sure as hell didn’t come all the way across the universe to play Rescue Rangers! You came for the Tesseract. I might have a pretty overinflated opinion of my own self-worth, but even I know I’m small beans compared to whatever space shit you’re all tied up in. So seriously, Loki, just cut the crap and tell me. What the fuck is going on?”

Loki’s reply is a vague ‘hmm’ as he leans into the fridge and digs around, moving things back and forth in a timewasting search for nothing in particular. He eventually pulls out a bag of carrots, which he chucks down on the table in front of Tony before taking his seat again. “You should eat.”

“No, I told you, I don’t want any fucking carrots!” Tony growls. “I’m not a rabbit! I just want you to tell me what’s going on. I just want…” He pushes his hair back from his forehead, sweaty and sticky and unwashed. “I think I deserve a little honesty. We’ve been on the run together for how many days now? And I still don’t have the slightest clue what you’re up to.”

“Right now, I am trying to help you recover from your little episode with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” says Loki, too quietly. “I will take care of you until you are well again.”

“Yeah, I know, and you’ll hug me and love me and call me George, I got it. That’s not the part I was asking about. I’m asking why. The Tesseract was right there, but instead of going after it, you came for me. You could have grabbed the one thing you came to this stupid planet to get, the only reason you’re here, but you left it there and took me with you instead. Why?”

Loki has exactly three emotions, which Tony’s seen in varying degrees of intensity over the past week: amused, pissed off, and blank. Amused and pissed off are pretty self-explanatory. Blank is the tricky one. It’s not an absence of emotion like Tony originally thought. It’s not the same cold, robotic distance that he sees in people like Natasha, who are able to shut the world out and feel nothing. Loki’s blank is different. It’s a mask, not a void. A perfectly crafted lie. Not I don’t feel anything, but I’m an expert at pretending I don’t feel anything. Big difference.

“I told you,” Blank-Loki says through an eerie sense of calm. “The Tesseract interferes with my abilities. I’m unable to shift with it, and trying to escape any other way would have been too difficult under the circumstances.”

“Not what I asked. You still came back for me even when you were clear of the tower and had no reason to return. Absolutely no reason, since you knew you couldn’t take the Tesseract. Why?”

“You freed me from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s prison. I was repaying the debt. Now we are even.”

“And you’ve been sitting around here for the last two days doing what?” Tony asks. “You could’ve gone back for the cube, but didn’t. You could’ve repaid your debt, dumped me here and gone back for it. Why didn’t you?”
“I see no reason to explain my actions to you,” answers Loki, still unnervingly quiet. Blank as ever.

“Not even with me being directly involved in your actions?”

He doesn’t reply.

“Why don’t you just tell me,” says Tony, thinking that maybe, if he uses a quiet enough voice, matching Loki in tone, his words will get through. “What’s your plan? Do you even still have a plan? What are you doing? We? Are we still a team? What are we doing?”

“You should eat your carrots,” is all Loki says.

“Carrots aren’t even real food. They’re an ingredient in food.” But he still eats one, because his stomach is growling and, well, convenience. “You have a lot to learn about proper care and feeding of humans,” he says as he chews.

“They’re far better for you than the greasy filth you generally choose to eat.”

“I like my greasy filth.” Carrots are no comparison. “But back to the actual topic we were talking about before you tried to distract me with nutrition, do you have a plan?”

Loki nods. “Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me the plan?”

“Not yet.”

“But in the future.”

“Perhaps.”

“You don’t trust me.” He doesn’t even bother to phrase that as a question.

Looking up from his mushrooms, Loki raises one eyebrow. “I trust you as much as I need to. And I am certain you feel the same way about me.”

Much as he’d like to deny that, much as he’d love to throw Loki’s words back in his face, Tony knows there’s too much truth in the statement. He does trust Loki, yes. But only as much as he needs to. A few nagging threads of doubt are still there, hanging over his head, and won’t be going anywhere any time soon.

“Well, maybe we can work on that,” he says, standing up. “Later. Right now? That carrot made me even hungrier, and being imprisoned by S.H.I.E.L.D. and falling out of my own tower have made me incredibly stressed, so here’s my game plan. I have had literally no time to relax in... I don’t even know how long. Probably months. So heads up: I am doing fuck all for the rest of the day. First I’m going to take a shower and try to feel like a small fraction of my old self again. Then I’m going to call for some greasy, filthy Chinese takeout with a side of extra filth and grease. Third, I’m going to take advantage of the fact that I’m not in New York to sit on the deck with my ginger beef and a beer, soaking up the sun.”

“Beer?” asks Loki. “After everything you’ve been through in the past three days, after all that was done to you, the first thing you want to do is drink more?”

“Third thing,” Tony corrects on his way out. “The first thing is showering, remember? Also, beer
doesn’t count as drinking. Beer is socializing. So you’re more than welcome to join me on the deck, unless your pallid ass is worried about getting a tan.”

ooo

He’s halfway through his shower before the guilt starts to seep in. Just a little bit at first, regretting one or two words here and there. Maybe he shouldn’t have said that. Or the other thing. Or dropped so many f-bombs. But then the dam breaks and when he replays the conversation in his mind as he towels off and pulls on clean clothes... He really shouldn’t have said that, he definitely should’ve steered clear of the other thing, and for the love of God, why did he have to start everything off on a sour note by being such a spaz instead of thanking Loki for saving his ungrateful hide?

“Son of a bitch...” he swears under his breath. So he trudges back to the kitchen, even though it feels about as comfortable as punching himself in the face, and plants himself two feet from Loki’s back. Loki’s still in exactly the same place. Picking at mushrooms. “Sorry,” he says, quickly, to get it over with.

“Sorry for what?” Loki snaps in return.

“For being such an asshole and not thanking you like I should’ve done. I’m stressed and unhappy and have the motherfucker of all headaches and I’m kind of freaked out by everything that’s happened, but that’s a shitty excuse, so I’m sorry. You’ve treated me a lot better than I ever expected or deserved. Which is part of what’s freaking me out, but that’s okay, I can deal. I should really stop being such a dickhead about it because I’m free and I’m safe and compared to how I felt after my forty-first birthday party, I’m actually in really good physical condition. And that’s all because of you. So. Thanks. Thank you. For everything you’ve done. And... even for the carrots. That was weird, but thoughtful.”

He watches the back of Loki’s head as Loki grudgingly nods. “You’re welcome.”

“And I’m sorry we don’t trust each other more.”

Loki’s only answer to that is another dip of his head as he leans over the mushroom bowl.

“We good now?”

“Hn.”

That pretty obviously means ‘no’. “Sorry.” Again. Even though the word is starting to become a little meaningless. An empty, quick-fix apology. He takes one more step forward to close the distance between them, and rests a hesitant hand on Loki’s shoulder. Loki flinches at the touch, but doesn’t shrug it off or pull away.

It reminds him of something. Something in a muddled memory from hours ago or yesterday or the day before or who even knows when: an action made all of fog and imperfection that he thought was a dream. Somebody in bed at his side. No magic.

“That wasn’t a dream, was it.”

“What?”

“You brought me water.”

“Of course I brought you water,” Loki mutters. “You would have died if I hadn’t.”
Tony nods. “Your magic is gone.”

Loki does pull away at that, wrenching his shoulder out of Tony’s grasp and standing up faster than the eye can track. “I told you that is no concern of yours,” he warns. “I need neither judgment nor pity from you, Tony Stark. I do what I must, and have been doing so for longer than you can even imagine.”

“I know,” say Tony, and he lets his hand fall down uselessly at his side. A sinking feeling in his gut matches the gesture too perfectly. “I get it; you’re a big boy and can take care of yourself. I’m not trying to pry or... anything. But if you ever feel like you might want to trust me a little more and have a go at telling me something about your mysterious self...?”

_Not a chance,_ says the icy glare in Loki’s eyes. The fortress walls are up. And they’re armed for combat.

“Okay. Well. If you change your mind? I’ll be on the deck.”

ooo

Loki doesn’t join Tony on the deck. But he does forgive Tony in time to find his way into the bedroom once the evening of relaxation has moved indoors. He sneaks in like a cat on the prowl, slinking through the door and skirting along the wall before he finally makes it over to perch on the edge of the bed. All of this is done without once looking at Tony. Instead, his eyes stay fixed on the TV. Which is, in that moment, showing a large-breasted blonde woman taking it doggy-style from a man whose muscular arms are littered with tattoos.

The long and awkward silence that ensues is a surprise to nobody.

Loki speaks first, in a (completely justified) tone of resigned disappointment. “Tony Stark, what are you watching?”

“Um,” Tony replies. “I think it’s ‘Busty MILF Addicted to Cock’, but I don’t remember if that’s the title or the synopsis.”

“And why are you watching this?”

“...I got bored with Big Bang Theory reruns?”

“I see,” says Loki, leaning back against the headboard. “So you intentionally chose to observe this troll-like oaf and his equally hideous woman rutting like pigs over any other form of entertainment?”

“The way you say that makes it sound like you’re trying to shame me,” says Tony. “Not going to happen. I have pretty much no sense of shame.”

“Why? You enjoy this artless display?”

“Since when does porn have to be art?”

“_Sexuality_ is an art,” Loki replies, and hell if those words don’t just slide off his tongue like liquid silk. Sinuous and enticing. “Every little nuance and hint and teasing promise. A touch or a kiss drawn out in anticipation of what might come. The fleeting caress that sends shivers down your spine. Skin just barely touching skin and shallow breath finding all those secret places that make your pulse race. Undressing inch by inch, feeling the weight of each piece of clothing slide down your shoulders and arms and back and thighs as you bare yourself to the vulnerability of the
bedroom, nothing but cool air to cloak your body, and you watch another do the same... For you.
All for you. A gift. Denial heightens expectation. There is a place for feral lust, yes, at the heart
of all desire, but would you not agree it is sweeter to savor each moment? Slowly? Prolonging it
almost to the point of intolerance, stoking embers into an inferno? A constant scattering of tiny
motions accumulates into something great when given time. It takes you higher than anything
you’ve ever known, further than any careless, animal encounter, until finally, finally, at the utmost
end, you can lose yourself in the glory of perfect satisfaction... That, Tony Stark, is a very fine art.
Not this...” He jerks his chin at the TV in a dismissive gesture. “...crude fucking.”

An art. Yes. Oh, yes, it is an art, a goddamn fine art, if mere words from the lips of a fallen angel
can incite the same reaction as any touch of magic. Filling Tony’s bloodstream with the same dark
red heat and concentrating in the same low, heavy place. “Shit,” he breathes. Those words inspire
too many dangerous pictures in the over-imaginative chaos of his mind. “Yeah that’s... Say that
again.”

“All of it?” Loki asks.

“Specifically the part about ‘crude fucking’. Coming from anybody else it would just be vulgar,
but somehow when you say it, the words are oddly poetic.”

Loki’s grin stretches wide enough to show a row of straight, white teeth. “Crude fucking,” he
purrs.

And that’s nothing short of a lightning strike of... what did Loki say? ‘Feral lust’? Yeah. A
lightning strike straight to his core that hums over his skin and electrifies every hair on his body.
He swallows the thick knot in his throat. “Right. Um. So. I think we should get naked now.”

Immediately, Loki’s smirk of wry amusement falls away into a blank stare. “That’s a very forward
statement.”

“I’m a very forward kind of person.”

“And what reason might we have to ‘get naked’, as you so charmingly phrase it?”

“Well,” Tony starts, “let’s see. It’s Friday evening. We’re sitting in bed, drinking beer, watching
porn, and you just started a conversation about what sounds like the Asgardian Kama Sutra. Add
to this the fact that I’m objectively a very okay-looking guy in desperate need of a rebound lay, and
you’re more or less an alien supermodel... Statistically speaking, I don’t think it’s possible for this
night to end without us sleeping together.”

“Statistically speaking,” Loki echoes back to him.

“I like to apply a good measure of scientific analysis to everything I do.”

“Do you ever apply critical thought to anything you do? Because that was honestly the worst
proposition I’ve ever had. And bear in mind that I come from a culture where the prelude to most
sexual encounters is some tactless cretin yelling ‘Oy you; get over here’ from across a mead-
soaked banquet hall.”

“Oh come on! You’ve been actively trying to get in my pants for the past week! What changed?”
"I was actively trying to rebalance my magic," Loki counters. "That is all."

"We signed a contract."

"To rebalance my magic. And to refresh your memory, the amendment to point three specifies that a substitute may be chosen at my discretion. Seeing as I have done so, the contract has been executed in its entirety and we are no longer bound by its terms."

"Sorry, guess again," says Tony. The contract is still sitting on the nightstand, right where he left it before they teleported to New York. And even though it now might have a water-glass ring of smudged ink, all words are still mostly legible. "Allow me to refresh your memory. In the matter of the service agreement between Tony Stark and Loki of Asgard, wherein Loki agrees to transport Tony to Stark Tower in New York City by way of magical teleportation, point one specifies that, in the event of irreconcilable differences arising between Tony and his girlfriend, Ms. Virginia Potts, Tony agrees to assist Loki in the rebalancing of Loki’s magic by means of... this is a bit smudged, but I’m pretty sure it says ‘intimate personal relations’.”

Loki rolls his eyes. "And points two and three say?"

"Point two,” Tony continues, “states that in the event that Tony and his girlfriend are happily reconciled, Tony will assist Loki to rebalance his magic by aiding in the search for an appropriate substitute to participate in the personal relations outlined in point one. Then point three, which is contingent on point two, clarifies that in the absence of any suitable candidate, as determined by Loki, Tony will be required to fulfill those duties necessary in the rebalancing of Loki’s magic, regardless of relationship status."

“And there it is,” says Loki. "Which part about my prerogative to nominate a substitute did you not understand?"

Holding out the paper to Loki, Tony taps point one. "The part about you only choosing a substitute in the event that I resume my relationship with Pepper. Since she ended up dumping my ass, the terms of point one are in effect. I’m required to engage in intimate personal relations with you. We’re still contractually bound to get it on."

"May I see that?” He doesn’t even give time for an answer before yanking the page out of Tony’s hands, ripping it in half, wadding the two halves into a ball, and chucking the ball across the room. "There. Contract executed."

"Hey!” Tony shouts. "That was a legal document! You can’t just-”

"It was a scribble of words on a page, Tony Stark, neither witnessed nor correctly sealed. It was as binding as a shackle made of water."

Right, because suddenly Loki wants out. Funny how that works in his favor. "Would you still say that if I was the one who wanted to break it?"

"I think it’s clear that I already have,” Loki answers with a brief and narrow smile. "If I truly wanted to hold you to our agreement, I could have accepted any of the... oh let me see, six times you attempted to initiate that sort of intimacy between us while in your drunken, drug-addled fever?"

And that makes Tony’s stomach leap. "...Six..."

"Yes, and over the course of only two days! You are persistent.”
“So why didn’t you?”

Maybe, at that, something ever so slightly more than ‘blank’ passes across Loki’s face. “Would you have done so, were our places reversed? Taken advantage of me in that way?”

No. Silently, Tony shakes his head.

“Then why should you think I would?”

Because you... But that beginning of an excuse, he knows, isn’t true. Even in the first days, back in the bathroom in Atlantic City, how far did Loki push him? Touches, kisses, a cuddle on the floor. Nothing worse than that, all clothing stayed on, and most of it was probably just Loki being the God of Assholes and trying to piss him off. Then their little encounter on the couch. As much as Tony hates to admit it, Loki was right: he initiated that one. For all he knows Loki could’ve been content with just cuddling until Thor got home, but he went ahead and turned it into something more. In the Texas motel... Well, they were both drunk out of their minds, so nobody can be held to blame for that one.

All along, Loki could’ve gone a lot further down a shady path. All along, Loki didn’t.

“Okay,” he says, picking up the remote and shutting off the TV. Artless porn seems more than a little inappropriate now. “So you’ve managed to successfully kill the mood. What time is it? Quarter to nine? Maybe we should just call it an early night and chastely go to sleep in separate beds to dream of... I don’t know, church and saints and heaven and shit. Be good, virtuous people for once.”

“That sounds dull.”

“Yeah, well...” He tosses the remote aside, letting it land somewhere near Loki’s feet, and eases his way down into bed. If he turns onto his side he can stare at the clock on the nightstand, though its glowing red numbers, 8:44, do nothing to make him the least bit sleepy.

At his back, he can hear Loki draw in a breath and sigh it out, and shift position.

“Hit the lights on the way out, will you?” Tony asks.

“Mm,” Loki agrees. Maybe. It’s probably an agreement. But he doesn’t move: not right away. He stays sitting there, shifting and sighing, until he finally says, “You know... That wasn’t an outright rejection.”

“What wasn’t a what?”

“I said no to your ludicrous proposal. That wasn’t a no to you.” Then the mattress dips near Tony’s shoulder, and Loki’s breath tickles in his ear. “You just need to try harder.”

All the pent-up desire that had fled his body only seconds earlier comes flooding back in at the sound of those words. All the want and all the need. Tony turns his head just enough to see Loki’s face, now inches from his own. “Harder is one of my specialties.”

Even Loki’s smirk shows off a hint of his straight, white teeth. Tony reaches up, hand aiming for the inviting curve of his cheek, but Loki pulls back before contact is made. “Ah-ah,” he says, raising a finger. “Not good enough. Not yet.”

“Then what?” Tony asks.
“Think of what I said before. About teasing hints and promises. What can you promise me? What if, in some other reality, I were a stranger you spied at some very boring event... What would you say?”

“I like to open with the line, ‘Hi, I’m Tony Stark.’”

“And then?”

“That’s usually enough to get me where I need to go.”

“Hm,” Loki says. Or hums. It’s a small sound, in his throat. He leans in to Tony’s ear again, this time pressing lips against skin. With the point of his tongue he delicately traces the rim, curving down to the lobe, which he takes between his teeth. Biting just hard enough to hurt.

That little jolt of pain shoots right down between Tony’s legs. “Oh fuck...” he hisses.

“Not today,” Loki whispers in reply. “But better luck next time? I’ll let you think this over and try to come up with a more enticing invitation.”

And that’s all he says before slipping away, sliding gracefully in his cat-like movements back to the far side of the bed. His feet meet the floor, but before he can stand, Tony rolls to the side, arm flashing out. He grabs Loki by the hand.

“Wait. I had a dream about you.”

Loki waits. Licks his lips. “A dream?”

It’s like a little challenge. Just another one of Loki’s games, one of a thousand tricks and riddles, and he can play along with this. “You want me to get your panties all hot and bothered with dirty talk, okay, here goes. I had a dream about you. When I was in the tower.”

“And?”

“I never knew how complicated Asgardian clothing was to take off.”

He pulls himself up to his hands and knees, crawling across the bed to Loki, who watches with that same old wry smirk. But there might just be a spark of something else in his eyes. Something curious. Something... intrigued.

“We were in you old glass cell on the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. I’ll spare you the racy details, but one image that’s been etched into my brain is the way you looked. The way your skin glowed in that ghostly blue light, like the sheen of a pearl. I’ve never seen anything like it. Alien but familiar all at once, because it looked like...”

His shirt comes off in one swift motion, over his head, tossed aside. Then his hands find Loki’s wrist, and the little button of his cuff, easing it open to push back the sleeve. Baring what lies beneath. In the light of the arc reactor, Loki’s arm is snowy pale. Patterns of blue veins rise prominently under translucent skin.

“Like this,” he says. “Just like this. Like you were mine. Bathed in my light. All for me. And... I wanted that. More than any of your eloquent words could ever describe, I wanted it and wanted you and wanted to see the way your body answered to my touch. That’s what excites me, Loki. Not some cheap quickie or any of that ‘crude fucking’. I like seeing what I can do. I like hearing somebody’s breath hitch when my hand slides here, pressing harder to coax out a little gasp, feeling muscles tighten with need... watching your back arch off the floor and knowing that I’m
responsible. That I hold the power over all the pleasure you feel. I like that. I’m a visual, tactile 
person. Always holding, touching, exploring, seeking out new and better ways to express myself. 
I like a challenge. I’m good at what I do and I’m stubborn as fuck, and I won’t give up until I can 
make you forget about every single other talentless motherfucker who ever wrongly thought 
himself worthy of touching you. That’s what I want.”

One hand takes hold of Loki’s wrist. The pulse races hot and hard under his fingertips, matching 
his own beat for beat.

“And think right now you want the exact same thing.”

Loki gives him one shallow nod. “Perhaps…”

“Then stay with me tonight.”
Nobody Gets Wasted on Amaretto

Chapter Summary

Drinking. Debauchery. A precariously balanced morning after. Tony's been through all that before, but never quite in this way.

Chapter Notes

This story has an explicit rating for a reason. And here you go. ;)

(Slightly pared-down, not-as-explicit edit of this chapter is posted on fanfiction.net. Story/author name are the same there, so the story shouldn't be hard to find for anybody who would rather read that version. No changes to plot.)

Take away sight and it’s suddenly so much easier to turn the mind on to all the other senses. Touch: the satin sleep mask Loki found in the nightstand drawer sits as a gentle weight on Tony’s eyelids, soft and cool. A ruffle of lace tickles the bridge of his nose. Smell: a tang of sweat in the air, warming on flushed skin, and the heady, sweet spice of amaretto. Sound: the intake of breath and the rustle of sheets that follow Loki’s movement. A bottom-heavy glass bottle slides briefly against wood. A tiny splash, and then touch again: a thin, cold finger of liquid trickles down from just below the arc reactor to gather in the hollow of Tony’s navel.

A sympathetic chill ripples down his spine as cool air whispers across his stomach.

“Do you suppose I might get drunk off of you?” Loki asks.

The sound of that silken voice comes from somewhere near Tony’s waist a fragment of a second before the tip of Loki’s slick tongue meets his skin, following the amaretto line. Tony’s back arches at its electric touch. “Not...likely,” he gasps. “Nobody gets wasted on amaretto, Loki. You’d have to drink more than that bottle holds.”

“Mm. I may be able to do that...” Another ribbon of liqueur, this time on the inside of Tony’s right elbow and down his forearm. Loki’s lips catch it all. “I may be interested in discovering how this tastes on every inch of your skin. Here, for example...” The heat of his mouth moves farther up Tony’s arm. “Here, I think I can detect a subtle hint of bitterness... perhaps the residue of soap from your shower. But over here...” His tongue slides over the curve of Tony’s ribcage, tracking the flow of liquid that spills a little too liberally and drips onto the mattress. “The sour and salt of sweat. Then up here is a different sort of bitterness,” he says at the place where Tony’s jaw meets his ear. “And you smell of pine. A perfume?”

A spidery thrill skitters down Tony’s neck. “Aftershave,” he murmurs. Blindly, he turns his head, but Loki’s already pulled away and his kiss catches only a wisp of hair.

His skin feels so hot. All over, burning in its exposure to the bedroom air. Everywhere explored by Loki’s tongue blazes with need, and everywhere not yet explored... oh, it strains. And if he
only slides his knee to the side, parting his legs just slightly, like a tiny hint...

Two of Loki’s fingers take that hint and skim their way up his inner thigh. “Is there something you desire, Tony Stark?”

Desire. Yes, there’s something he desires. His entire body is saturated with desire, begging for anything more than these ghostly caresses. But where to start? “Blindfold off.” He rolls his hips toward Loki’s hand, but already it’s gone. “I want to be able to see you.”

Loki sounds like he’s smirking. “Lack of sight is the purpose of the game. Sight ruins the surprise of what I might decide to do to you next. If you could see, you would know I was about to...”

It’s impossible not to feel a surge of anticipation at those words, tingling low in his body near the echo of Loki’s touch. Those two fingers land again, this time on the outside of his knee, and quickly glide up to his waist. They walk their way back down in delicate steps to the ticklish place at the very top of his leg to draw circular patterns on skin already far too sensitive and taut with longing. Then two hands are on him, pushing his legs apart and spreading them wide open. Loki settles down between them with a quiet ‘hmm’ that makes Tony’s blood race and his throat go dry.

The first touch is only air. Loki’s mouth is so close to Tony’s skin he can feel it: warm breath, maybe the brush of a strand of hair, radiant heat from Loki’s cheek. No more than a paper-thin gap between the two of them.

The second touch is hardly more. The soft edge of Loki’s lip meets Tony’s achingly hard shaft, barely there but enough to pull a stifled moan from his throat all the same.

Third touch: Tony’s fists tighten around handfuls of sheets as Loki’s tongue darts out from between his lips, now pursed for gentle little kisses up and down Tony’s length.

Eight kisses, then Loki leans back. Blood pounds in Tony’s ears, down his neck, to his heart, out to every extremity, hot and fast and hard and... fuck, he needs more. He needs so much more than just flowery kisses, and he doesn’t even care how shameless he looks now. How desperate. He reaches down to grope at thin air, searching for Loki’s hand or shoulder or hair or face, but finds nothing at all.

“Loki...” he groans.

Loki’s voice is at the end of the bed. “Yes?”

“For fuck’s sake you bastard, don’t stop there!”

The answering ‘mm-hmm’ sounds a lot like a closed-mouth laugh. “I am not stopping here.”

One more kiss, on Tony’s leg, just past where his outstretched hand can reach. Another one, higher, and Tony’s fingertips brush Loki’s tangled hair. A kiss on the other side, near Tony’s hip, then higher again, and a lick at the residue of amaretto on his stomach. Tony’s hand closes over the back of Loki’s neck to spur him on. Two quick kisses below the center of Tony’s ribcage, one on either side of the arc reactor. On the left side of his upper chest. On his shoulder. A series along his collarbone to his neck, up to his ear, his temple, and his eyes through the mask. Always moving upwards, until Loki’s body is laid out flush against Tony’s, covering him completely. Face to face at last.

Still separated by the stifling barrier of Loki’s clothing.

“Why the hell are you still dressed?” Tony whispers.
“Because nobody has taken the time to undress me yet,” Loki replies.

“If you sit up just a bit and give me about three seconds...”

Loki shakes his head, nose brushing Tony’s as he does. “One thing first. One more sense for you to explore. This one has been neglected all night...”

This kiss isn’t a ghost kiss. Not fleeting, not soft or light. This one is lips hard against lips, open-mouthed with the taste of amaretto like alcoholic marzipan. Tongues slip past teeth like it’s impossible to be close enough. It is impossible. Tony’s right hand holds Loki’s neck; the left wraps around Loki’s back, clinging and dragging him into a vise-like grip, but it’s still not enough. Not what Tony wants. He wants...

He pushes up off the bed and rolls both of them over so that he’s on top of Loki. And fuck, he doesn’t want to let go of their embrace, but he has more important things to do. Without ever breaking the kiss, he slides his hands up to Loki’s shirt collar and the button holding it closed.

“Time to get you out of this,” he murmurs against Loki’s lips.

“Do you want the blindfold off?”

Tony grins. “Loki, if you think I need to be able to see to undress somebody...”

Each button pops open easily, one by one, down the center of Loki’s chest. Tony’s mouth follows his hands as a wedge of waiting skin is exposed, all the way down to the waistband of Loki’s pants. There’s another button, which opens just as effortlessly, and a zipper. The pants slip so easily off Loki’s hips and down his legs. Only one piece of clothing left. One thin layer of fabric. It’s smooth as satin under Tony’s hands and against his face, with the smallest wisp of a familiar scent. Nothing else in the world smells like that.

“Are you actually wearing silk boxer shorts?” he has to ask.

The mattress shifts like Loki’s propping himself up on his elbows. “Yes. Why?”

“It’s hilariously cliché. But... somehow really sexy at the same time. I guess that’s why it became a cliché.”

“I found them in the dresser.”

“...Wait, you’re wearing my silk boxer shorts?”

He has to pull off the blindfold at that and have a look. Finally look, at the flawless body spread out on the bed before him. All elegant limbs and tangling black hair and snowy skin flushed with just a touch of pink and the sheen of sweat. Tony’s not usually the kind of guy to be stunned into silence, but fuck if this sight doesn’t do the trick, hitting him hard after so long spent in darkness and deprivation. Whatever he thought he needed before? Yeah, he needs it ten times more now...

“What’s the matter?” Loki asks through a wicked smile. “Has the power of my astonishing beauty stolen your voice?”

Well yes, but since it would be too embarrassing to admit it now that he’s been mocked... He retaliates by sliding his hands up Loki’s legs and into the silk shorts. With an undignified moan, Loki drops his head back and falls to the mattress. Bullseye.

The shorts are Tony’s. He recognizes the pattern (dark red, faded gold elephant print) as
something he bought in Thailand a couple years ago, because why the hell wouldn’t you buy elephant-printed silk everything in Thailand? And it’s hard to tell whether sticking his hands up his own underwear that’s currently on Loki is really weird or the hottest thing ever. Also watching his hand move inside those underwear. Feeling Loki’s reaction. Watching a little damp patch bloom when he presses his tongue against the thin fabric...

(Okay, yeah, it’s the hottest thing ever.)

Loki’s response is immediate: an inhaled gasp and an exhaled sigh before his hands fly down to the elastic waistband of the shorts, roughly trying to shove them out of the way.

Tony frees one of his own hands to swat Loki’s away. “Quit that,” he says. “You made me wear a blindfold for an hour. I make you keep the shorts on.”

“That may... impede things...”

“I dunno...” says Tony, giving Loki’s cock a quick squeeze before picking up the pace of his strokes. “I think we’re doing pretty good all considering.”

Maybe better than good. Loki rocks up into his grip, first matching his pace, then subtly urging him on. Faster. And Tony gladly complies. It’s a wonderful thing, the sense of sight: being able to watch Loki’s eyes flutter closed and his mouth fall open. Watch his chest rise and fall with each rapid breath. Slowly losing control, second by second, with Tony all too eager to see him come undone. Breathing even faster now. Eyes squeezed shut.

“Look at me,” Tony demands.

Loki opens his eyes, tilting his head enough for his sightline to meet Tony’s. Smiling, Tony mimes one little kiss before his mouth closes over the head of Loki’s cock. A few more strokes, a few broad licks through the fabric of the shorts... and a shudder overwhelms Loki’s body as he loses control completely.

There’s a soft taste of salt on Tony’s tongue, hot and wet through thin silk. The intimate, fleshy smell of sweat fills his nose. The feel of Loki’s trembling body under his hands, the sound of labored, uneven breathing, the sight of Loki’s hand releasing its hold on the mattress and falling limply to the side... All those senses come together so perfectly. He gives himself a minute to appreciate the harmony of it all before crawling up to lie alongside Loki and press a quick kiss to his neck.

“Well...” he says. “Now that you’ve made a mess of my underwear, I think they can come off.”

“Go ahead,” Loki replies through a quiet laugh. “Undressing me is your responsibility.”

“I will. In a second. But I’ll get you do to something for me first.”

“What?”

Tony’s lips glide up to Loki’s ear. “Roll over and lie on your front.”

Loki follows the order without any complaint. Without a single word. Without even a blink of hesitation, he rolls over eagerly. And just as eagerly lifts his hips when Tony reaches down to pull off the silk shorts.

“Impatient, are we?” Tony asks.
“Only being helpful.”

“Funny how you’re always most helpful when the help works out in your favor...”

Or it could just as easily be Tony’s favor. That milky-smooth back now on display is there for him. All for him. Every perfect part of it, right down to that perfectly rounded ass. He swallows the sudden lump in his throat, letting it slide all the way down through his stomach to pulse between his legs. Yeah. All for him...

The contrast of his tanned hands against Loki’s pale skin is a beautiful thing to see. Almost mesmerizing, how dark Tony’s fingers look as they caress their way up Loki’s thighs, over his backside, following the length of his spine to his neck and then back down again. Tracing the raised lines of his ribs and the angles of his shoulder blades. All the contours of pliant skin and unyielding bone beneath his touch.

“What do you think everybody would say?” Tony asks.

“Everybody?”

“The Avengers. Romanoff. Rogers. Coulson. If they knew what we were up to...”

Loki laughs. “Do you want them to know?”

Tough question to answer. On the one hand, Tony’s convinced it’d be impossible for anybody to consider Loki a threat to world peace if they could see him right now, in this debauched state, and feel his impossibly soft skin. Like a harmless baby bunny. On the other hand...

“No,” he says, kneeling between Loki’s thighs. “I don’t want them to know. I don’t want to share anything. This is just for me.”

He has a box of condoms and a bottle of lube in the nightstand drawer. And no memory of the circumstances under which he last used those, but in this moment? Who the hell cares. It’s just Loki now. Just Loki, there before him, ready and waiting.

He squirts the lube onto his hand and slicks his fingers before reaching down to lightly stroke the cleft of Loki’s ass. That earns an immediate response: Loki hisses in a quick breath and pushes back against Tony’s hand in search of more contact.

“What’s that?” Tony asks, pressing a single finger against Loki’s entrance, circling and stroking. “You enjoying something here?”

“Mm...” Loki replies into his pillow.

“Sorry, didn’t catch that. What’d you say?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to use grown-up words, Loki. I don’t understand this mumbling. Do you like where we’re going? Want me to continue?”

“Yes, you puerile fuck!” Loki snaps over his shoulder. “Stop being such a-” His words are cut off by a sharp gasp as Tony slides a finger inside his intimate, welcoming heat.

“Then all you need to do is ask,” Tony laughs. “Your wish is my command, Prince Charming.”

“Tony Stark, I swear I will...”
“Sorry, no,” Tony says as he slowly works in a second finger to join the first and stretch and caress Loki from the inside. “I swear I will. Your threats are getting kind of old. Time for me to issue some new ones. So here we go.” He leans forward, bracing himself with one forearm across Loki’s upper back so he can whisper something a little better than sweet nothings in Loki’s ear.

“Loki of Asgard, I am going to fuck you. But not hard, and not fast. No, it’s going to be long and slow and keep you struggling in vain towards completion until I say you’re done. And that won’t be any time soon. Got it?”

He can’t see Loki’s face, not fully, but he can see the very corner of a mouth stretched into a sinful smile. “Do your worst.”

“I plan to.”

Three fingers. Loki hides any expression and sound in his pillow, not giving anything away, which is fine by Tony. He likes this game. The game of who’s going to give up first. (Hint: it will be Loki. Loki may be able to hide his face, but he can’t hide the way his body so shamelessly responds to every stroke.) Tony removes his hand just as Loki pushes up against it. Enough of the opening act; it’s show time. He rolls a condom down and positions himself against Loki’s entrance. But doesn’t push in yet. Just pauses instead, firmly up against Loki’s entrance as a momentary promise of what’s to come. Feeling the speeding rush of Loki’s pulse and the soundless catch of his breath...

He slides in slowly. So, so slowly. No more than an inch at first. Then back out. Pause. And in again, a little further. Back out. Rocking in, out, all the way in, thrirling at the sight of his hard length disappearing into Loki’s willing body... Pause. He has to close his eyes and bite down on his lip and just breathe... His arms are shaking. The buildup of need, the intoxicating sight of Loki beneath him, the feeling of slick pressure... His body all but screams at him with the need to move. (Fuck fuck fuck who’s stupid idea was this to go so slow!?)

The secret isn’t to call up unsexy mental images to kill the mood, or mentally recite sports stats like some men claim. It’s mechanics. Sex is nothing more than biological mechanics. Moving parts in an engine working towards a purpose. Tony just needs to concentrate on the mechanics. Each piece, each action, the ultimate goal still far in the distance. Too hard and too fast and the parts wear out before their time, but under the right measure of control...

Tony Stark has always been good at mechanics. Good and precise. Highly skilled when it comes to achieving the desired outcome. He begins to move, building one tiny action on top of another to settle into a gentle, even rhythm. Just slow enough to savor.

One arm slides around Loki’s side in time with his languid strokes. His fingers glide under and up along the flat, muscled plane of Loki’s chest, to his throat. Squeeze. Loki’s blood pounds through his veins and his breath rushes like a river beneath the soft skin of his neck. He tilts his head back at the urging of Tony’s hand. Not far. But far enough for a ragged kiss on the corner of his mouth.

“Touch yourself,” Tony breathes against Loki’s lips.

Loki answers with a smile that bares his teeth. And immediate compliance. His ass rises up as his hand slithers down, taking hold of his cock and stroking in time with Tony’s thrusts.

Tony’s free hand follows to cover Loki’s own. “Hard again already.”
“Godly stamina,” Loki murmurs.

Smug little fucker. Tony picks up the pace. Surging in and out and guiding Loki’s accelerating strokes. He can feel, beneath the hand still holding Loki’s neck, the little clenches of muscle and gasps of every time he pushes in at exactly the right angle. Loki tries to drop his head back down, hide his face in the pillow again, but what fun is that? No, better to see every grimace of pleasure... hear every begging moan, no matter how small...

...Even if that sight and those sounds drive Tony too close to the edge. There’s a spring coiling up inside him. Part of the engine. Twisting tighter with each thrust, building up energy, ready to fire. (But not yet, not yet, not yet, not yet!) His entire being is pulled too taut. He needs to slow down. Retreat back into the established rhythm.

Loki moans again, though this time it sounds like frustration at the change of speed. Good. Let him wait.

“Tony Stark...”

“Yes?”

“Tony Stark, by the Nine Realms... if you don’t... if you don’t... nnn...”

“If I don’t what?” Tony asks. “What happened to sexuality as a fine art? Expectation and denial?”

But his voice is too breathy, too rough, and full of hitches. He’s straining to stay in control. Holding everything together by a single, fraying cord that’s getting weaker by the second. They can’t keep this up much longer. He knows it. Loki knows it. Every cell in both their bodies knows it.

To hell with fine art.

He squeezes his hand around Loki’s neck before slamming all the way in. No more time for elegance or pretense, it’s all just crude fucking now. Pounding into the tight grip of Loki’s body. Feeling the spring wind tighter, feeling Loki writhe and tense. Each merciless stroke pushes them closer. Again. And again. Reckless need building inside. Blazing to life.

“I’m...” Is all Loki has time to say before a wordless moan boils up from inside and he’s coming hard, spilling onto the sheets. Spine arched, head thrown back, one hand reaching up to grasp at the headboard and-

Oh God, the sight of him!

Tony lets himself go. Lets everything uncoil, lets the cord snap, lets the convulsion of blinding white heat rip through him. Searing pleasure in currents that roll down his legs and up to his skull, through every bone, shaking him from head to toe. On and on in waves. Shocks and aftershocks. Until he’s utterly drained, muscles bled dry of every speck of strength, and he collapses. Face pressed into damp, matted black hair.

“...Loki...”

Loki’s the one who eventually disentangles them. He moves gently to the side, unhooking arms and legs and hands clawed with desire, until they’re two separate people once more. Tony watches him through hazy eyes as he sits up and wipes sweat from his face, raking it back into his hair.

He’s so beautiful. So beautiful. Skin flushed and glistening with exertion and hair a mess of curls.
His shoulders, still heaving with untamed breath, hunch over as his head droops forward. The smooth line of his shoulder standing as a dark silhouette against the nightstand lamp.  

Beautiful. Tony’s hand reaches up, maybe of its own accord, and the backs of his fingers stroke down the length of Loki’s arm.  

It takes nothing further for a small smile to quirk its way across Loki’s half-shadowed lips. He switches off the lamp and, in darkness, carefully settles down into a waiting embrace. One arm around Tony’s waist. Tony’s arm curling up around his back. His breath against Tony’s ear.  

Perfect and beautiful.  

ooo  

Usually Tony’s the big spoon. That’s just how things work out when he actually spends the whole night with somebody: he wakes up with a warm body in his arms and his dick pressed up against the curve of an inviting ass. He will admit, however, that there’s something to be said for being in the opposite position. And if he weren’t hungry enough to make his stomach feel like it’s trying to digest itself, he might be tempted to take advantage of the situation. Or, you know, definitely take advantage of the situation.  

Instead he slips quietly out from between the sheets, careful not to let any of his movements wake Loki, who still looks infuriatingly beautiful with his tangled hair and softly parted lips and thick, black eyelashes resting on cheeks still touched with a hint of pink. Maybe breakfast in bed? Yeah. Absolutely breakfast in bed. He pulls on a pair of clean shorts and heads for the kitchen.  

This breakfast plan would be a lot easier if he had some Toaster Strudels or that bacon you just have to put in the microwave. Instead, the fridge is full of vegetables and vegetables and more vegetables and a family pack of striploin steak and vegetables and two cartons of eggs. So he can cook up some eggs or... No, that’s about all. Eggs it is. Maybe steak afterwards if the eggs turn out okay and he starts to feel more ambitious.  

Two pots, three pans, and eighteen eggs later, breakfast is done. Not the most impressive breakfast in the world, just eggs and coffee and some weird organic pineapple-guava juice that Loki must’ve wanted, and his presentation on a Grand Canyon souvenir tray leaves something to be desired, but it’s food. He balances the tray precariously on one hand to make his way back to the bedroom.  

“Loki?”  

Loki’s head rises up from the pillow instantaneously. And whatever reaction Tony was expecting – a smile, a smirk, a snarky comment? – this isn’t it. It’s the blank look again. The mask. The complete shutout of any emotion. And now there’s a sinking feeling in Tony’s gut because, shit, what’s gone wrong now to fuck up what could’ve been a real nice morning?  

“Uh,” he says, and clears his throat. “I... made breakfast?”  

And Loki answers with a continued blank stare. “You...”  

“Eggs,” says Tony, setting the tray down on the bed. “We got some hard-boiled eggs, and scrambled eggs, and fried eggs that turned into scrambled eggs. And this bowl is raw eggs because... I didn’t know what you’d like.”  

“You made breakfast,” Loki says softly.  

“Yeah. Like I said, I know how to cook eggs at least... two different ways. And coffee and juice.”
Loki’s blank look doesn’t change. None of this is helping at all, and Tony’s bad feeling (Anxiety? Dread?) only grows worse with each passing second. Fuck. Shoving that bad feeling aside won’t do either of them any favors.

“Okay,” he says crossing his arms over his chest. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” Loki answers in a neat little lie.

“Cut the BS. Considering the vast quantities of bodily fluids we recently exchanged, I think I deserve for you to at least consider letting the truth out. Okay? Okay. So why don’t you just tell me what’s wrong. Do you regret what happened last night?”

“Do you?”

Bastard can never answer a straight question. “I asked you first.”

The blank stare gives away nothing as Loki grabs one of the raw eggs, cracks it against the edge of the tray, and throws it back like a shot.

“I hope you know that’s disgusting,” says Tony, which Loki answers with a narrow-eyed scowl. Good. Finally something other than blank. Now they’re getting somewhere. He picks up a hard-boiled egg as Loki goes for another raw. Or, an egg he thought was hard-boiled, until a half-cooked mess starts to seep out into his hand when he cracks the shell...

“Aw, shit. Okay. Remember when I said I knew how to cook eggs two different ways? That was an optimistic exaggeration. I only know how to make scrambled eggs. Here, you can have this one.”

Silently nodding, Loki reaches out, though instead of taking the egg, his fingers close around Tony’s wrist. He draws Tony’s hand up to his mouth.

Interesting how things can go from ominous and awkward to turned on as all fuck in the span of... let’s see, a quarter of a second, if that? Also interesting how Loki licking failed breakfast slime from Tony’s hand can be so elegantly erotic. But that’s how it goes. So.

“I am deeply mentally conflicted right now,” says Tony.

Loki looks up. “Why is that?”

“Well, um. You’re being strange and distant and refusing to talk to me, but you’re okay with literally eating out of my hand?”

“Yes.”

Loki’s tongue is way too effective a distraction, tracing the shape of Tony’s thumb before skimming down to his wrist. Its touch sends shivers down the length of his arm. Incredibly potent, hair-stand-on-end shivers.

“Goddamnit you’re even better at this than I am,” he murmurs.

“Better than what?” asks Loki with one more little lick.

“The masterful ability to steer away from awkward conversations by way of sex. That’s kind of my deal. You know, to spare myself the whole business of discussing what we’re doing and what’s going to happen now. Avoiding the part where we pretend to be stunned when we realize
each of us had completely different intentions last night. You told me a while back that you’ve had this conversation a few times before, and so have I, but I’m usually the one in your position being prickly and difficult and trying to seduce my way out of- Okay, stop that!”

He jerks his hand away as Loki tries to bite down on his fingertip. “Your bizarrely sexy antics aren’t going to work on me! I mean, okay, they are, but I’m not going to let them. Yet. We are going to talk about this first, and you are going to participate. It’s going to be the most painful and slow and misguided conversation in the history of time because you’re forcing me to be the instigating partner here, which is...” Oh, fuck it. Watching Loki’s coolly blank face stare back at him isn’t doing anything to make the whole idea of actually trying to talk this through any less ridiculous. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t want to have this conversation, you clearly don’t either, we’re the worst goddamn people in the world to talk about feelings and shit, so I vote we stick our heads in the sand and tell ourselves everything is fine. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” answers Loki.

“Agreed,” Tony repeats one more time while scooping up a plate of scrambled eggs, because saying things out loud makes them easier to believe, doesn’t it? Sweeping complex problems under the bedroom rug is as good a way as any to get rid of them. And Loki is one big problem. One big, hazariously attractive problem of the kind Tony doesn’t need and shouldn’t want.

Shouldn’t. Seriously, he shouldn’t. Shouldn’t want that and shouldn’t have done that. Not in anybody’s book would that be a good idea. He fucked S.H.I.E.L.D.’s public enemy number one. He fucked a megalomaniacal, murderous warlord from outer space. Probably one of the top three items on his list of things never to do. Definitely covered by the general rule of ‘do not touch Loki under any circumstances, ever’. And he did it.

But looking at that megalomaniacal space warlord? The one who’s sitting there naked save for a haphazardly placed sheet over his lower half, downing raw eggs like they’re jello shots? The one who, just eight hours ago, was sticky with sweat and writhing in this very bed, losing himself in pleasure as Tony explored every glorious secret of his body?

Only the world’s biggest asshole would regret even a second of it.

Tony sets his scrambled egg plate aside. They’re rubbery and taste like crap anyway. “Just so you know,” he says to Loki, “I don’t regret it. I’m not sorry it happened, and I wouldn’t change a thing. I’ve regretted a lot of choices I’ve made in this area in the past, but... not this one. Who knows why. I guess I felt pretty good last night. And even this morning. Which isn’t how it usually works out, I’ll give you that. And then I tried to make breakfast, and son of a bitch, you do regret it, don’t you? Is that why you’re being so weird?”

This time there’s not even any blank stare to tell him Loki’s paying attention. Now he only gets falsely-interested-in-the-not-hard-boiled-eggs lack of eye contact.

“Well, if so, there’s nothing I can do about that,” he continues. “But if you’re being weird because you don’t know where I stand and can’t ask because you’re as emotionally demonstrative as a turtle and showing even a tiny speck of humanity would shatter your omnipotent godly bastard image? There you go. You now know what I think. And it’d be really nice if you could tell me where you’re at, or at least give me a clue by eating more uncooked egg out of my hand, because even though that should’ve been gross it was actually really, really hot. I don’t know why. There must be something wrong with me.”

“No.”

Loki’s word is so quiet Tony barely hears it over the background hum of air conditioning.
“...What did you say?”

“I said ‘no’. And please stop talking.”

“Believe me I’d like to, but I can’t,” says Tony. “Your eerie silence makes me uncomfortable. When I get uncomfortable, I talk. Somebody who may or may not have had an eye patch once accused me of trying to take control of situations by constantly yammering on, and I’ll admit that idea has merit because everybody always listens to the loudest jackass in the room. And wait, what did you mean by ‘no’?”

“I meant no, there’s nothing wrong with you,” says Loki. His eyes flick up to meet Tony’s. Maybe a bit less than blank this time. Maybe softer and almost open. (Not quite. Just almost.) “So please stop talking. And come over here.”

The twist in Tony’s stomach could be good or bad. Loki’s words could be good or bad. Why it so impossible to judge things with him? “Is that a... good ‘come over here’ or...?”

It’s possible that Loki’s reaction starts off as the first half-second of a scowl. Force of habit, maybe. It’s possible he wants to say something snarky. Something like, ‘Tony Stark, if I have to ask you to come over here again I will drag you by your ears since you seem unable to listen with them and they might as well be put to use.’ It’s also possible he wants to ignore the whole goddamn, misguided conversation, turn away, and never think about it again. Three very real possibilities, and fragments of each play across his face through a long, silent pause.

“...Yes,” he finally allows, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue and inhaling and exhaling a shaky breath before speaking, as if a kind-hearted ‘yes’ in the strange realm of Loki’s mind is a fickle word that demands ritual appeasement. “It would be...”

Tony’s already crawling across the bed at ‘yes’, and doesn’t stop until he and Loki are nose to nose with very little space between them. “Good how?"

Both of Loki’s hands reach up to cup Tony’s face and lead him in for a kiss that’s neither as soft nor as innocent as he was expecting. He can’t help but gasp in surprise as Loki’s mouth possessively covers his own, biting down and sucking on his lower lip.

“I guess this means we’re okay now?” he breathes, feeling Loki’s teeth against his skin.

“Mm,” Loki hums in reply.

“Are you done being weird about things?”

“Are you done talking?”

Tony pulls back just enough to look Loki in the eye. “Not quite. I’m deeply mentally conflicted again.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re infuriating as fuck and go from hot to cold and back again in the space of minutes. No: seconds. You’re a secretive asshole, I never know what you’re thinking, you never want me to know what you’re thinking... It drives me crazy. I spend a lot of time actively talking myself out of punching you in the face, and the biggest reason I don’t punch you in the face is because I know I’d break my hand before dealing you any damage. But at the same time...”

His tongue finds Loki’s, probing and teasing as their lips move against each other’s in one more
intoxicating kiss.

“...None of that seems too important. And I don’t care.”
A drinking game devolves (or evolves?) into a serious discussion, and against all odds, Tony ends up being the only sober, clothed person in the house.

More notes at the end, because I don't want to start whining right off the bat, but up front I do want to put a warning for references to sexual abuse in this chapter. Nothing at all graphic, but it is implied.

“No, Loki, we can’t just change the rules like that. This game has a very long and prestigious history, dating all the way back to at least 1993 or something. You have to respect the legacy. Pants come off. Now.”

“No. No more whining or you have to take another shot of rum, too. I told you all this before we started, and you agreed. Pants.”

It isn’t like this is the most complicated game in the world or anything. It’s nothing more than a handy conglomerate of gambling, drinking, stripping, and the truth half of truth or dare. The first player rolls one die, and asks the second a question based on the number that comes up. A one equals the kind of mundane thing you’d be comfortable asking any stranger on the street. A six gets you a deep, dark secret. The second player has the power veto any question by drinking a number of shots equal to the number rolled and removing one article of clothing. Three vetoes total allowed.

And Loki just lost his second.

“I’m not asking you again,” Tony says as Loki stares back at him with what can only be described as a look of unfiltered loathing. “Refusal to comply with the rules makes you lose a turn.”

“You just invented that,” snarls Loki.

“No, I didn’t just invent that. I invented it back in 1993, along with the rest of the game. This is an established rule. Are you going to take your pants off or not?”

Yes. Yes, he’s going to take his pants off. Grudgingly, but they come off, revealing silk shorts beneath. Green. But same gold elephant print.

“Good boy,” says Tony. “Your turn.”

He scratches at his jawline, feeling the mess of stubble beneath his fingers. He should’ve shaved
this morning. He should’ve shaved yesterday. Hell, he should’ve shaved a week ago. This is getting out of control, and yet for reasons unknown he keeps putting it off. Maybe due to a subconscious desire to look more like a fugitive on the run, physically distanced from his former self? Or sheer laziness. One of the two.

“Are you growing a beard?” Loki asks with a gesture of his chin.

“Is that your question for this round?”

Scowling, Loki rolls the die. One. “I suppose it might as well be,” he sighs.

“You have the shittiest luck of anyone I’ve ever played this with,” says Tony. “What’s that, the fifth one you’ve rolled so far? Have you got anything above three yet?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Right, I guess you don’t want me making fun of you for being the only person in the universe to actually consistently fail at a game of complete chance. So. Um. Beard. I don’t know? Maybe? I hadn’t made a conscious decision either way. Just kind of going with the flow right now. Why, do you think I should? Move towards more of an Obi-wan Kenobi look?”

“Is that your question for this round?” Loki asks.

Tony rolls. Three. “Nope.”

“Sorry, you’ve already asked. And yes, I think a beard might suit you very well.”

“No, that doesn’t count! I get another crappy, low-level question. Two ones for a three. More than fair.”

Loki’s hard eyes bore into Tony’s for a long, tense moment before he looks away with a huff and a shake of his head. “Fine,” he agrees. “You may ask one more insignificant question, Tony Stark.”

And the question all but presents itself right then and there. “Why do you always call me ‘Tony Stark’?”

“Because that is your name,” Loki answers. A small frown pulls at the corners of his mouth. “What else would I call you?”

“Tony. It’s just Tony. Not Tony Stark. ‘Tony Stark’ makes me feel kind of like I’m listening to a news report about myself. My name is Tony, and you can call me that. Stark is my family name. You only use it when you’re trying to be either respectful or ironically disrespectful. Not after we’ve seen each other naked and, you know, done more than just see.”

“Tony,” Loki repeats slowly, his frown growing. “No, I don’t think I like that. It sounds strange by itself.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible, since it’s phonetically very similar to Loki. Anyway,” he adds, “get used to it. Otherwise I’ll start calling you ‘Loki of Asgard’ all the time. Unless you guys have family names on your alien homeworld? Do you?”

Reaching for the die, Loki shakes his head. “It’s not your turn.”

He rolls a two. And looks like he might be a hair’s breadth away from crushing the mocking little cube beneath his fist.
“Truly phenomenal,” says Tony. “Remind me never to take you to Vegas.”

“How long does this idiotic game last?” snarls Loki.

“Until we both run out of vetoes. Which, judging by the astounding speed at which you’re not asking me any questions I might feel uncomfortable answering, will probably be a year from now.”

Loki mutters something to himself. Choppy words too soft to hear, spinning on the underside of his breath. “I can’t think of any other pointless questions to ask you. The rum makes my head feel…”

“Well, that’s what you get for using up your vetoes so fast,” Tony replies, and he glances at the clock. “Eleven shots of rum in half an hour will do that to you.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Is that a serious question or are you just wasting your turns now?”

“Serious,” says Loki.

It may be strange, but he does look serious. Even rubbing his face as the last round of shots starts to hit him, there’s no sense of anything other than honest curiosity (okay, maybe a healthy dose of annoyance, but mostly curiosity) when Loki looks at Tony through reddening eyes.

Something about it sets off an uncomfortable twinge deep in Tony’s gut. “Uh... no. No, I don’t. When I was twelve my dad sat me down and had one of those really awkward father-son talks about manhood and responsibility and how a lot of the women I’ll meet in my life will just be after me for money. And God help me if I get some gold digger pregnant. He gave me a glass of whisky and a box of condoms and made it clear he wouldn’t be there to clean up the mess if I did something stupid and ruined my life. Between that and his follow-up talk about STDs... yeah. Scared me into an OCD level of condom dependency. So no kids. Not even any pets or plants. I’m strictly a cars and robots kind of guy. Out of curiosity, why do you ask? Is this one of those cultural difference things that would be normal to ask about on Asgard yet makes no sense here?”

“Probably,” Loki answers, shrugging.

“I don’t think I like where this conversation is going,” mutters Tony. “Are you about to drop the bomb and tell me you have a dozen illegitimate children back home?”

“You’ll have to roll for that.”

No. There are some things that are better left unknown, at least for now, and this sounds like one of them. “Thanks, but I prefer my comfortable delusion that everything you do when I’m not watching doesn’t exist. Tell me about...” He rolls another three. “…your happiest childhood memory instead.”

Eyes narrowed, Loki stares at him. The look of loathing is back. “Why do you ask me these ridiculous things?”

Because you’ve already vetoed the two questions I asked about the Tesseract, Tony thinks.

Because things that are ‘ridiculous’ are the only things you’ll talk about. Because I rolled a three and can’t hit you with anything better. But Loki starts speaking before he has a chance to voice anything aloud.

“It was after a festival in the city. Driving home in the carriage afterward. Thor sat up front with
father, golden prince of the realm. He would be king one day, so naturally people needed to see him. Mother and I sat in the back, in the enclosed part of the carriage. It had been a long day and I was so tired... I remember leaning against her shoulder as I stared out the window, watching the city go by. It was raining. But she had her arm around me, and both of us were tucked inside the warmth of her cloak. She smelled of roses and warm milk and told me stories as we clattered over the muddy road: legends of mountain peaks and distant stars. I wished that drive could have lasted for hours. I don’t ever remember feeling so content. Just mother and I, happy in our own little place, while greedy Thor sat soaking wet and shivering up front on display.”

Tony can picture the scene in his mind, so clearly despite Loki’s minimal description. Rain pattering against glass. A boy with black hair, maybe nine years old, nestled under the arm of a soft, round-faced woman. Her cloak of rich brown fur envelops the both of them. It’s a tableau of serenity. The mother presses a kiss to the boy’s forehead while pulling the fur more snugly up to his chin; he closes his eyes.

Sentimental is the last thing anybody would accuse Tony Stark of being, but that image...

Loki’s happiest childhood memory. “You know,” Tony says softly, “most people would have answered that question with a story about getting a puppy or building a tree house or going camping.”

“I’m sure I did all those things too,” Loki replies. “But those events were never exclusively happy. And I know the moment in the carriage may seem small and common and even dull to everyone else, but to me...” One small breath stretches out seconds-long into a leaden pause. “...it was perfect.”

Blank. He looks so unnervingly blank, thin-lipped and glassy-eyed. The defenses are raised so high around this one little chink in his walls, scar tissue quickly filling the void.

“You misunderstand what I meant,” says Tony. “When I said most people would’ve told a puppy story, that wasn’t me saying you should’ve done the same. That was me trying to say, in my shitty, unclear way, that... I don’t even know. Your seems more real, somehow. Real happiness.”


Looking down at the three on the table, Tony sighs. “Mine would’ve been some cliché story about getting a skateboard for Christmas.”

“Did it at least make you happy?” ask Loki.

“The skateboard? Maybe. It was more that my parents had absolutely refused to buy me one all year, and I was sure I wasn’t going to get it, but there under the tree on Christmas morning... a powder blue skateboard with red wheels. They actually listened to me for once and got me something I wanted instead of what they thought I should have. Anyway, maudlin reminiscing aside, please hurry up and roll a six so you can ask me something I don’t want to answer and I can use one of my vetoes and start getting drunk. I don’t like being the only sober, clothed person in the house. That’s too much responsibility.”

Loki picks up the die and places it back on the table, six side up. “Six.”

“I’ll allow it.”

“First time you bedded another man?”

“Very good question.”
It’s a sad, sad state of affairs if Tony’s sober enough to pour out six consecutive shots of Flor de Caña without spilling a drop. He tosses back three, pulls his shirt off, then downs the rest. “I feel better already. So the question was the first time I slept with a guy? That would’ve been 2006. Or 2005. Somewhere in there. No, 2006.”

“Why do you still answer the question if you’ve used your veto?”

“Because,” says Tony, “technically, there’s nothing in the rules saying I can’t do both. And I feel like oversharing at the moment. So, in 2006, I was dating this woman named Mariana. And by ‘dating’ I mean I’d seen her more than twice. That counted as a long-term relationship. After a couple wild nights together, I suggested we go for a threesome. Her answer was yeah, sounds great, as long as it’s with another guy. Well. I freaked out and said no, that’s disgusting, that’s weird, absolutely not... It turned into a big production.”

It’s subtle, the way Loki slowly moves closer. He shifts position. He stretches and balances his weight from one side to the other. He lies down, and sits back up again a second later. All the while inching across the living room carpet over to where Tony sits, back against the couch. “Why all the fuss?” he asks.

“Because I was a kid in the 70s and a teenager in the 80s,” Tony answers. “Back then, calling another kid ‘gay’ was one of the worst insults you could throw out. It was a transition time, when everybody knew what gay was, the concept was out of the closet, so to speak, but it wasn’t acceptable. Not by a long shot. Maybe for a couple really outrageous celebrities, but regular people? Teenagers? Right at the time when AIDS was starting to explode into big-ticket paranoia? No fucking way. Maybe if I’d been born fifteen or even ten years later I wouldn’t have lain awake at night wondering what was so wrong with me that I was having these thoughts and dreams that were wrong and disgusting and gay. But in the early 80s? It scared the hell out of me. I might be different. I might be a freak. For the most part I could convince myself I was normal, because I still liked girls and jerked off to titty pics, but there was always that little doubt in my mind. The question of what if and why don’t you try it, and the voice that says she’s a total babe but check out her boyfriend’s ass. I forced myself to ignore that.”

“Until?” Loki’s so close now. Less than an armspan away.

“Until I was thirty-six. All that time spent lying to myself and working too hard and overcompensating to make sure I was never anything but normal and 100% straight... then Mariana comes along with this suggestion of a threesome with another guy. I thought about it for almost a week. Agonized for hours arguing back and forth with myself until, in the end, I was drunk and feeling rebellious and finally thought, why the hell shouldn’t I? It’s two-thousand-fucking-six. This isn’t 1984 any more, I’m not a confused kid, I’m a grown adult and I can do whatever I want with other consenting adults in the privacy of my own home. I told Mariana I wanted to do it, she came over with her friend Michael... The only regret I had afterward is that I’d wasted twenty years of my life worrying about whether or not something was normal, which is really stupid in hindsight considering I’d been willing to do any crazy, kinky thing with any number of women. Yet I held out for twenty years on sleeping with another man. Even though this desire was obviously a part of me and had been for as long as I can remember. Weird what we allow and deny ourselves for the sake of fitting in, huh?”

“And then what happened? After you came to this realization?”

Tony shrugs. “Ironically, not much. I saw Michael a few more times, just the two of us. Every so often at some sleazy Beverly Hills party I’d hook up with a guy. Always an actor or other high-profile figure like me who’d share my need to keep things discreet and avoid being seen. I could
accept myself, but I couldn’t – and I guess I still can’t – accept the risk of seeing my name tied to a gay sex scandal on every gossip blog and tabloid magazine between here and Timbuktu. Maybe in another twenty years, but not yet. I have to defend enough of my life choices to the media without adding the always-misunderstood stigma of bisexuality into the mix.”

“Mm,” says Loki. And that’s all: one humming syllable through closed lips, smiling when Tony looks over at him. Half a smile in a face touched with the faint pink of too much rum.

“Are you drunk?” Tony asks him.

“I believe I am. Are you?”

“No. Just starting to feel the buzz from the shots I took.”

Six shots, creeping slowly through his body, from his stomach up to his head and down through his arms and legs. There are still four ounces or so left in the bottle. He could finish that easily. Probably should. Just to round things off. Pick up the bottle, unscrew the top, throw it back one mouthful at a time. And there’s more in the cupboard. More rum. More scotch. More vodka and liqueurs. Lots to go on.

But six shots are enough to make him lose a little bit of control. To make him feel a little dizzy. A little weighed down. A little foggy and a little unclear. A little bit helpless. The last time he had anything more he was... (falling out of bed and struggling across the floor, arms too weak and uncoordinated to push himself up, clawing his way to the bathroom, desperately slow...)

The taste lingers in the residue of rum on his tongue: bitterness and bile, tequila and dragons. The rest of the Flor de Caña bottle holds nothing better than that.

“Are you going to have any more?” asks Loki.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Wise choice.”

If so, it’s the only wise choice he’s ever made of this nature in his whole life. But there’s always a first time for everything.

So he picks up the die instead of the rum, and rolls a six. “You know what my favorite part of this game is?” he asks, turning to look at Loki with a smirk. “The part where I’m way better at it than you are. So now I’m going to ask you to tell me about your first time with a guy.”

“Then I will ask you to pour me six shots, and I will use my third veto.”

“Really? On such a simple question, after I just told you all about my own experience?”

Loki only waits a moment longer. When it’s obvious that Tony isn’t making any kind of move to pour out the drinks he leans forward and grabs the bottle himself. “Yours is a nice story,” he says in a stony voice. “Mine is not. It’s better left alone.”

Like talking to a brick wall. Or slamming into one at high speed: the shock of that sudden, jarring impact reverberates through Tony’s whole body. It’s not just Loki’s words. It’s the blankness again. The way he can sit there so emotionlessly, pouring out shots of rum with inhuman steadiness and a face like a porcelain mask. The careful distance when he speaks, as if he’s telling the mundane story of something that happened to somebody else, somebody unimportant, in fargone, irrelevant history.
Just four shots of rum, the fourth one incomplete. That’s all the bottle holds. They go down quickly, one after another. “Go get another bottle.”

“You know... you don’t have to-” Tony starts, but Loki cuts over him with words as sharp as a blade.

“Yes. I do. Go.”

The other bottle of rum in the cupboard is over half empty, which might be a good thing at this point. Tony hands it over without words, and likewise without words, Loki takes it and pours out his remaining shots. His eyes stay fixed on the safe haven of his hands.

There have been a few times in Tony’s life when he wished he knew what to say. Or what to do. Not many, but a few: times when he almost wished he were one of those empathetic, soulful heroes who knew how to weep at a tragedy instead of cracking black jokes while hiding behind make-believe indifference. Times when he wished he were the kind of person who had concise and free-flowing feelings instead of this jumbled mess of confusion squeezing his chest. But how did those kinds of people cope?

“Loki,” he says, carefully and quietly as he sits back down. “If you want to tell me anything... honestly, anything, whatever you want to talk about, just to say it...” Except that sounds like a fucking high school guidance counselor, and with the look Loki gives him in reply, he feels like a fucking high school guidance counselor, too. Maybe he should also mention something completely hypocritical about how drinking won’t solve any of Loki’s problems.

Instead, he just sits there on the floor, back against the arm of the couch, and racks his brain for any kind of poignant observation.

Loki beats him to it. “I woke up one morning. After three years of this... relationship. Arrangement, really. But whatever you call it, after three years, I woke up one morning and he was there in bed beside me. There was nothing unusual about this morning at all. Just a morning like any other, but I woke up with a sudden and overwhelming sense of clarity. Almost as if I had been asleep for three years, but was now awake. Truly awake. I could see and feel and think for the first time. I woke up, and I knew, with absolute conviction, that I could not stand the thought of him continuing to live and draw breath one more day. So. He died in an unfortunate hunting accident that afternoon. His horse spooked, the saddle cinch broke, and he was thrown into a ravine. Several people took the time to tell me how very sorry they were. They knew how close we had been. But do you know what they called me, Tony Stark, before that day? Do you know how Asgard knew me?”

No. Tony shakes his head no, with his jaw clenched against any other words that might try to escape.

“Princess Loki’. They called me Princess. Because I was so thin and pale and gentle and rarely picked up a sword, preferring instead to study magic with the girls. Princess. But after that day, after that man died, and after several of his close friends did as well, all under mysterious circumstances... poison, drowning, madness leading to suicide, disappearing into the night, never to be seen again... After that, they called me ‘Loki the Snake’. They knew what I had done, but nobody could prove a thing. ‘Loki the Snake’! As if that would shame me. I would rather be a snake than a bear. A snake is small and silent and quick, and you rarely see him until it’s too late. He can kill a sleeping bear so easily. I took the snake as my sigil. I had a shield with a snake, and daggers with snake handles, and some guessed my helmet was fashioned with goat’s horns, but no: they are the hooked fangs of a snake. Thus I stole the name they gave me and made it my own, and if you ask anyone now, very few will remember its true origin. They think I am Loki the
Snake because I chose to be.”

“And you’re fine with this?” Tony has to ask. “Being the solitary snake? Killing people, just like that?”

Loki’s hand shoots forward, snatching the die up off the table and rolling it on the floor between them.

Five.

He flashes that half-smile of his again. “How many people have you killed? You personally? Excluding the thousands of deaths caused by the weapons you designed and produced, how many? I know that number isn’t zero.”

It isn’t zero. Zero wouldn’t land with such a crushing weight on Tony’s shoulders the second those words slide from Loki’s tongue. “We’re not playing any more,” he says, flat out.

“Yes we are. You said the game goes on until all the vetoes are gone, and you still have two more. How many people have you killed?”

“I don’t know!” Tony snaps, and that just piles on more weight. Why doesn’t he know? Why didn’t he count? Something that important, people’s lives that he took... He should know. He remembers so many stupid things, all those meaningless details of life like phone numbers and mathematical formulas and where to turn on highways. But people he’s killed? Lives he ended? All those men in the cave and in the camp and in that town. How many were there? He should know. “Maybe...” What? “No, I don’t even know. I didn’t count.”

Didn’t try. And didn’t think, and didn’t feel, and didn’t ever stop to consider what he had done. As if smashed skulls and charred bodies were a reasonable price to pay for one man’s freedom.

“You see?” says Loki. “You judge me for doing what I do while standing guilty of the exact same crime. In the end, does it matter why we did it? The result is identical. People are dead because of me, and because of you.”

“But do you regret what you did?”

“Roll.”

Four.

“No,” says Loki. “They deserved to die. In my mind. And who can tell me my opinion is wrong? I can only act for myself. In my own defense. What about you? Do you regret your choices?”

Tony pushes his hair back. There’s sweat beading on his forehead. Cold and sickly. It’s a sign of guilt, for sure, but regret? How can he ever regret living? How can he regret fighting back against those who would keep him behind bars, and all the good that came as the result of building that first suit of armor? Maybe there are things he could’ve done differently, but regret is such a strong word. Silently, he shakes his head.

“We’re the same, Tony Stark. You and I. We do what we must, in the only way we know how.”

“We’re not the same.”

“We are,” Loki insists.
“You killed eighty people at that S.H.I.E.L.D. operations base when you stole the Tesseract.”

Loki nods. “I did. And if you knew the alternative, you would agree that eighty lives is a very small price to pay for the safety of your world. A million lives would be a small price. If you knew all the terrible things that could happen.”

“Like what?” He doesn’t let himself look at Loki, though his heart is suddenly pounding in his throat. *Calm, stay calm, stay calm, feign disinterest and maybe he’ll say—*

“Thanos wants the Tesseract. And he’ll have it. One way or another, whether I give it to him or if he finds a way to cross the universe and take it on his own.”

Thanos. Who the fuck is Thanos? Thor guessed that somebody had given Loki that scepter and sent him to earth: is this the guy? From the corner of his eye, Tony watches as Loki’s head drops back against the couch seat. Seventeen ounces of rum in forty minutes. Any human would be drooling on the floor. But an Asgardian... is he drunk enough to let something slip? “Oh?” Tony asks.

Yes. He is. “Thanos cares nothing for your weak little planet, which could be either a curse or a blessing. A curse if he came himself: he would kill you all and take what he wanted, leaving nothing behind. But a blessing if he gains the cube before that happens. Midgard is worthless to him. His only interest is the Tesseract. If I claim it for him, he will leave you under my rule, forget about you, and your world will be spared.”

“Then we have to get it back from S.H.I.E.L.D.,” says Tony, and shit, there’s a little too much excitement in his voice. Excitement and urgency. “If all this asshole Thanos wants is the damn Tesseract, let’s give it to him! If that’s all this is, if that’s why you were sent here, I say we go for it. I don’t want that thing on Earth any more. Rogers thinks it’s bad news, and if we tell him our plan, I’m sure he’d be on our side. Banner too.”

“It’s somewhat more complicated than that,” Loki murmurs.

“How?”

“The Tesseract is an artifact of incredible power. In the hands of someone like Thanos... you don’t know what he might do. He has grandiose notions of ruling the universe.”

“I’ve seen enough sci-fi movies to know that never works,” says Tony. “The universe is a pretty big place for one Evil Empire. He’d have his hands more than full with just one galaxy.”

“It’s true he may fail,” Loki allows. “It’s equally true he may succeed in conquering his own small area and stop there. Or he may eventually be ambitious enough to wish to subjugate all known life. But once he has the power, I suspect he will first turn his attention to Asgard and the other weapons he might find there.”

“Can Asgard defend itself against him?”

Loki’s answering silence stretches out into a long strand of uncertainty. “I don’t know,” is all he eventually admits.

“Well, let’s worry about that later. Maybe we can give this bastard the Tesseract, tip off Asgard, and let him get himself killed in battle. We’ll work out the kinks when the time comes. For now? We’re back to square one. Steal the dumb thing from S.H.I.E.L.D..”

“Hm.”
And that’s all Loki will give away: a little hum as his eyes droop closed. There’s probably a lot more to this, a lot of details he’s left out and other factors Tony really needs to know, but at least this is a start. Thanos. A name. A purpose. A reason behind Loki’s sudden appearance on Earth. A few more pieces falling into place.

“Tired?” Tony asks. Sidling closer, he slips one arm around the back of Loki’s neck.

“Mm-hm.”

“Here. Up on the couch. You can have a nap and sleep off the rum while I...” *Think up a plan to save the world.* “...watch TV.”

“Why did you free me from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s prison?”

“...What?”

Loki’s eyes open again as he unsteadily follows Tony’s guidance up onto the couch to sink into a half-sitting, half lying position. “Why did you free me? I asked you that first day. But you never answered.”

True: he never did. “Because I was a prisoner once,” Tony says. “Living through the hell of threats and interrogations and tortures and forced labor. For three months. I guess the way S.H.I.E.L.D. was treating you hit too close to home. I thought I could do better. And I think I have.”

“You have,” Loki agrees.

“So why do you still refuse to trust me, and act so weird and distant and *blank* all the time? Like this morning?”

A ripple of that blankness passes over Loki’s face. A second of it, and then it dissolves. Maybe blank is too hard to hold after all that booze. Drunk emotions are too slippery to contain and like to escape their protective shell. And under that blank is the kind of raw, stinging sadness that makes Tony sorry he asked.

Reaching up in a tentative gesture, Loki’s hand brushes Tony’s neck. “Come here?” he says, like it’s a question to which the answer might be ‘no’, and his hand keeps a tight hold when Tony leans in to a sloppy, rum-laced kiss.

“I *try* to trust you. I *try.*”

“You can,” Tony answers in assurance.

But Loki only repeats his words: “I try.”

Chapter End Notes

Point one: Thanks for reading! :) I can honestly never say that enough. It really makes me happy that you guys continue to read and enjoy this story.

Pont two: Now for the shitty news. I’m kind of 90% sure I won’t be able to post an update next week. :( For a couple reasons. Primarily, it’s because I live in Calgary,
Alberta, and if you haven't seen anything on the news, google "Calgary flood" and you'll get an idea of what's going on here. I'm okay, everyone I know is okay, but some friends and family have damage to their homes and the whole city is kind of screwed up right now. My mom is going to be staying with me for this coming week, my job is all chaotic because we're not allowed in our building until further notice, we're scrambling to pull together creative ways to work from home, and everything is just a big ol' ball of UGH. So, I probably won't have any writing time. I'm going to try, because this this story is a positive distraction at the moment, but it's not looking good for the immediate future based on how hard it was just to get this week's chapter done. (Like, I wrote most of it this evening and just finished right now, which is why it's not my favorite piece of writing ever, but I still wanted to get it out on time.)

So yeah. That's a thing. Anyhoo, hope you liked this week's instalment, and I'll see y'all again in two.
Drop Everything, Starting with Pants

Chapter Summary

Tony finds himself in the middle of a strangely domestic situation: one which Loki seems reluctant to leave behind. But he learns a little more about the hows and whys of Loki's magic, and discovers that he, Tony Stark, might just have the dumbest superpower in the world.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Thank you so much to everyone who left their comments and well-wishes on the last chapter. It's been a hectic time, but things are returning to normal here. While there's still a lot of damage in some places, I'm thankful at least that everyone I know is safe and well and back at home now. There's been a huge amount of support through donations and volunteers working to clean up and rebuild the city and surrounding areas. We're on the right track. :)

Now back to your regularly scheduled Tony/Loki programming!

Tony would’ve bet money that Loki would be the first to crack, but after four days, the so-called God of Mischief seems nothing but perfectly content. It’s like they’ve fallen into a lazy, domestic routine, and it happened so easily, unchallenged in comfortable silence. Nobody brings up the awkward question of whether or not what happened on Friday night was a one-hit wonder. Friday was Friday. No need for discussion. No need to ask why or what next. That answer’s obvious enough in the way Loki doesn’t hesitate to follow Tony into the bedroom every night, and in the way Tony shrugs off his clothes the second they’re through the door. In the way Tony wakes up each morning with Loki’s arm wrapped vine-like around his waist.

Tony says nothing when Loki slides like a ghost into the shower behind him, because there’s nothing to say. No complaint. No hesitance. It feels like Loki should be there. Like something would be missing if Loki weren’t there, tracing soap lines down his back under a curtain of water. It feels natural to sit next to Loki at the breakfast table, knees barely touching as they eat a hodgepodge of eggs, Tony’s ridiculous invention of fruit sandwiches, and badly fried potatoes. Tony touches Loki’s back in passing as they search the kitchen for dishwasher tabs. Loki’s hand brushes up Tony’s arm when they give up and decide, yet again, to just add to the growing pile of dirty plates in the sink. Little gestures that Tony knows weren’t there before. Though now it feels like such things always were.

They’re not in a relationship. They might be in a relationship. Nobody’s bothered trying to define what they are. There’s no need to. Things just work.

Except for the part where unemployment in Phoenix doesn’t suit Tony at all: that part goes over like a lead balloon, and Tony’s pretty sure that one more day of not actively trying to reclaim the Tesseract will have him climbing the walls in anxious boredom. Four days, and Loki hasn’t said a
word. No plan of action, no forthcoming information, and no suggestion that maybe they should get their asses back to New York. Silence all around.

Thus if Tony Stark had bet money on Loki being the first to crack, and on Loki being the first to insist they get their show on the road, Tony Stark would’ve lost.

ooo

“I fixed the toilet,” he says to Loki, as if Loki might care or even be the kind of person who would have noticed that the toilet needed a tune-up in the first place.

Loki’s gaze stays right where it is, focused on nothing in particular in the middle of the living room. “Oh?”

“Yes. The flush was a little off, so I shortened the chain. Works like a charm now. Then I noticed the hot water tap in the shower was loose, so I tightened that, and rebalanced the ceiling fan to cut down on noise.”

“Mm.”

“My next project might be trying to see how well I can adapt an old aromatherapy vaporizer I found in the spare room into something more useful.”

“Mm.”

“Are you just going to-”

“-Sit here all day allegedly doing nothing at all?” Loki finishes for him. “Until you grow too bored to function, having fixed every toilet and door hinge in the house at least twice, and you decide to come over here and make a nuisance of yourself by sitting down and slowly inching closer as if I won’t notice? Until you’re practically sitting in my lap and things quickly escalate into tearing our clothes off and falling to the floor in a repeat of what happened when we had this exact conversation yesterday? If so, yes: I had scheduled that into my plans for today. But later,” he adds, holding up his hand when Tony makes a move forward. “I’m otherwise occupied at the moment.”

Killjoy. “Doing what?” Tony asks, because as far as he can tell, the answer to that question is ‘nothing’. Loki’s sitting on the couch, facing towards the TV but with a blank expression that says he’s not taking anything in. Just sitting and staring.

“Attemping an astral ascent to Thanos’ scepter so I can unbind my armor.”

And suddenly there’s that name again, its reappearance jolting through Tony’s body like a tiny electric shock. In four days, Loki has said less than a peep about the Tesseract and the psycho who sent him to get it. Total avoidance, and now it comes up again in that offhandedly casual way. So does that mean he’s finally ready to talk a little more? Carefully, Tony takes a seat in the overstuffed leather chair opposite Loki’s couch. “Thanos’ scepter?”

Thor had said the scepter wasn’t of Asgardian origin. Said that somebody must’ve given it to Loki, but didn’t yet know who. So there’s the answer to that question. Thanos. The would-be Evil Emperor.

But Loki doesn’t take the bait. “This is very advanced, very difficult magic,” he says instead. “I need to concentrate.”
“Concentrate on...?”

That earns Tony one sharp look (the ‘you idiot’ look with which Tony has become very familiar of late) and a grunting sigh. The implication is clear: ‘either sit there and shut up, or make yourself scarce’. Tony can do that. Or he can try. For a little while, at least. He leans back in the chair, folding his hands behind his neck, and makes a show of shutting his mouth with tightly pursed lips. The ‘you idiot’ look stays firmly planted on Loki’s face as he lowers his eyes and goes back to doing... whatever he was doing before. Staring into space. If what he’s doing really is high power magic, it’s magic unlike anything Tony ever expected to see. No hand-waving use of the Force. No Latin-sounding Hogwarts incantations. Not even any meditation in a yoga pose. Most disappointing, though, is the complete lack of evidence that anything at all is happening. Loki sits there with glazed eyes and a vacant expression, like any other moron watching daytime TV, with not so much as a flicker of the living room lamps in the presence of his amazing wizard powers. Minutes crawl by. Five, then ten, while Tony drums his fingers on his knee and watches the horse-shaped clock on the bookshelf, waiting for anything to explode or, at the very least, start glowing.

Nothing does. The session ends as uneventfully as it began, with a sigh and a shake of the head as Loki sinks back into the couch, concentration broken.

“So... every movie about wizards has lied to me?” Tony asks.

Loki doesn’t even dignify that with a verbal response. Just a raised eyebrow.

“You have a very odd sense of what magic should be.”

“Maybe,” Tony agrees. “Maybe my line of work has conditioned me to associate progress with loud noises and things catching on fire. Or maybe you’re just pretending to do invisible magic as a means of stalling.”

At that, Loki looks up to meet Tony’s eye again. “Stalling?” he asks. A sliver of poisonous intimidation bristles in his voice.

Not that Tony’s in any mood to be intimidated by somebody wearing a towel and a Heineken t-shirt. “Yeah. Stalling. We know we need to get back to New York. We know we need to get the Tesseract. But every day, instead of telling me you’re ready to go, you come in here, sit your ass down in front of the TV, and do sweet fuck all. You have to admit there’s something off about this scenario. Almost like, oh, I don’t know, you have absolutely no interest in getting back in the saddle?”

“Possibly.” Loki turns around on him. “Or, possibly, the Tesseract is no longer in New York, and I am trying to track its location before we go skipping off across all of Midgard. I told you at the beginning of this adventure that, unlike you and Thor, I like to plan things carefully.”

“Yes,” says Tony, “you just like spending time with me but are too prickly to admit it, so you make up elaborate stories about-”

It’s not often that a look can shut Tony Stark up with all the efficiency of a punch to the face, but somehow Loki is one of few people able to do just that with no trouble at all. There’s a darkening
menace in his crystalline eyes that screams out, If you say one more word, I will cause your head to explode. Also something in the back of Tony’s mind that says, It’s probably not normal for me to legitimately worry about having my head exploded by the guy I’m fucking. But then, the guy he’s fucking is a murderous immortal shapeshifting ice giant alien warlord, so trying to apply the rules of normalcy to this sort of situation might just be a square peg/round hole kind of deal.

“...Right, okay,” he says slowly. “It’s definitely not my scintillating conversation that keeps you around, so I’ll just assume it’s my Adonis-like body and move on back to safer topics of conversation. Like magical relics from outer space. The Tesseract. It’s not in New York?”

Loki holds his head-exploding glare as long as he can, but ultimately it melts into a grudging nod. “It’s no longer in your tower, or in the city at all. Neither is the scepter. Neither is Thor. All three have gone somewhere I can’t easily find, too far away.”

“So they’re back out over the Atlantic in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s flying submarine,” Tony says.

“You think so?” asks Loki.

“Well, I don’t know how familiar you are with Earth geography, but if something is farther from here than New York, there’s a good chance it’ll be over the ocean, yeah. That’s some scientific logic to augment your voodoo. Which actually brings up an interesting point: how about you try telling me what the hell you’re doing so I can maybe help?”

The glare comes back. Silently. Quite possibly with more murderous intensity.

“I like you way better when you’re naked in bed,” grumbles Tony. “You’re a lot less horrible.”

“And I like you way better when your mouth is too busy to talk,” Loki smoothly replies. “You’re a lot more tolerable.”

“So you agree we should drop everything, starting with pants, and have sex right now?”

No. Loki’s not that easily swayed. Which is a real shame, because Tony is.

“Once I’ve located the scepter and unbound my armor. For now, Tony Stark, I’m sorry, but I have work to do. I’ll need to concentrate a great amount of energy to follow such a weak trail. We can play later.”

*I’ll count on it*, Tony can’t help but think. Because now that the idea is lodged in his mind, imagination spinning through all the better ways they could spend this sluggish afternoon... Shit. Why does Loki have to look so ridiculously attractive all the time? Sitting there with his adorable TV-zombie expression, hair all uncombed in wild curls after this morning’s shower, wearing a loosely fastened towel, long and graceful limbs sprawling out over the couch...

It might not be the best of ideas to jump on him right now, but hell if it’s not tempting. Really tempting.

Tony’ll just have to distract himself with stupid questions instead. “How many different magical powers do you have anyway? Sexual harassment, Jedi mind tricks, illusions, invisibility, now you’re a mental bloodhound?”

“Magic is not a sport with a set of allowable actions, Tony Stark,” Loki answers with the kind of exasperated frown usually only managed by humorless elementary school teachers. “It is not a musical scale with a certain number of notes. Assuming a finite number of magical abilities is about as sensible as assuming a finite number of answers to mathematics.
“Then what?”

“I’m trying to concentrate.”

“No you’re not. You admitted just a minute ago the Tesseract is too far away for you to track, so trying again won’t do much. You should probably give up now and come to bed with me. A nice, long, relaxing afternoon nap. Sort of. Maybe not relaxing. Or nap, so much. Nice and long: yes.”

“Tony Stark.”

It’s a warning. The verbal equivalent to his ‘I will make your head explode’ glare.

“Or,” Tony offers as a compromise, “you can tell me how your magic works.”

“Why would you...” Loki doesn’t finish the sentence, though it more or less finishes itself.

“Why would I want to know?” Tony asks. “Well, one, because I’m curious, but mostly, two, because I’m bored out of my mind and want to leave this place. I have a theory that if I can understand what you’re doing, and what your limitations are, I’ll be able to help. Magic and science together have a way better chance of success than either of us alone.”

He’s right. He knows he’s right, and Loki knows he’s right. They’ve already come so much farther together than they could’ve done alone, and they’ll need to keep going down this road together if they hope to have any chance of success against the behemoth that is S.H.I.E.L.D.. But what Loki says in reply is almost too quiet to hear, a growl under his breath that Tony barely manages to catch: “Magic is a science. That’s what you don’t understand.”

Tony blinks. “Huh?”

The blade of Loki’s voice has been sharpened on something, though it’s not so much annoyance now as it is resignation when he sighs his answer. “You keep saying ‘magic’ and ‘science’ as if they’re two completely different disciplines. What we call ‘magic’ is nothing more than another science largely unknown to humans. And those few humans who do know it are often treated as frauds by ignorant peers who lack the ability to understand. Magic is...” He pauses, eyes darting from space to space in empty air as if searching for elusive words, before settling on, “Think of this. What separates humans from animals?”

“Reason?” Tony asks, shrugging. “Critical though? Ingenuity?”

Loki nods. “Exactly. Humans are able think in abstract ways. They have moral guidelines and worry about what is right and what is wrong, and how to better themselves and their societies. In contrast, an animal in the wild thinks only of eating and mating and surviving. Humans have the capacity to learn and teach and build on the knowledge of others. Think of how much your people have done in the last thousand years, yet what have wolves done in that same time? A human today is vastly different from the humans I first knew. But a wolf has not changed at all. So with that reference in mind: can you imagine the differences that must exist between humans and the next step up on the scale of higher beings? What the Aesir, for example, must be able to do with their minds and their bodies, if we are to humans what humans are to animals?”

“I...” Had never thought of that. It’s the unavoidable attitude of a planet that has yet to develop practical space travel: that smug, self-centered belief (no, knowledge) that humans are the pinnacle of evolution. Nothing is better. Never has been and never will be. Just humans, with no competition. There are gods, sure, but those exist only as distant figures in the minds of the religious, unknowable and immeasurable. Humans have no real rivals for top spot on the pyramid
of life. In their own safe, insular little world, they’re king of the castle.

Until now.

“Humans can manipulate their vocal chords and tongues into millions of varieties of speech,” says Loki, “because their brains are advanced enough to allow this ability. If you came from a species that could only howl and shriek like animals, you might consider speech to be ‘magic’. Likewise, I am able to choose the pace at which my blood regenerates, as you recently witnessed, but this is not ‘magic’ as you understand the word. It is simply me having far more control over my body than most humans would think possible, because healing, to you, is an autonomic function. Magic is not a fantastic fairy story. It does not come out of the air with a puff of smoke to create something from nothing. It is the ability to harness energy flows and use them manipulate matter. All it takes is knowledge and skill. There’s no limit to what a magic-wielder can do. Only how well it can be done.”

“Hm,” says Tony, and he wishes he could think up some better reply, something clever, because despite the unfamiliarity of it all, and despite all the things that should logically be written off as total bunk, what Loki’s saying actually makes sense. Fantasy magic, as nice an idea as it is with the ability to wave a wand and conjure sparkles and rainbows in the blink of an eye, never amounted to anything more than escapist entertainment. Pulp fiction and Saturday morning cartoons. But this... This, he could legitimately believe. This is no more outlandish than an undiscovered branch on the growing tree of evolution.

“Do you remember what I told you about coincidences?” Loki asks.

Tony nods. “That they don’t exist.”

“Exactly. Everything you perceive as ‘coincidence’ is merely a subconscious attunement to environmental energy. When we first arrived in this house, you started thinking of items you used to own, only to find them sitting there in a closet the next day. So what made you think of them? The books and clothing you told me about? Not coincidence: energy. Every time you touch an inanimate object, you leave residual energy behind. The longer you hold it, the more important it is to you, the more energy you transfer. This slowly degrades, in the manner of a radioactive half-life, but when you walked into this house there was still enough of your energy or the energy of someone you knew on those items for your brain to detect. But since humans lack the ability to control this recognition, the odd time it happens, you call it ‘coincidence’.”

“So humans can access... magic,” says Tony, though it feels so strange using that word in what could otherwise be classified as a serious scientific discussion. ‘Magic’ just sounds so Las Vegas reality show.

“In some ways,” Loki answers with a nod. “It’s rare, but not impossible, for humans to master control over their bodies or develop a rudimentary ability to read energy flows and descry something of the future. Some claim astral projection, though I’d be reluctant to believe them simply because your brains are not equipped to perform such advanced feats. It would be like a sheep learning to fly: unnatural and not biologically possible.”

“We’re not sheep,” Tony mutters, though he lets the insult slide. “But all Asgardians have these abilities?”

“In the same way as all humans have the ability to sing. Some croak dismally, some struggle to carry a tune, some have pleasant yet unremarkable voices, and some create awe-inspiring music to outshine the birds.”
And what a stretch it is to figure out where Loki falls on that spectrum. “Let me guess,” says Tony. “You outshine the birds?”

Loki just grins, and it’s a smile that might be flirtatious if it weren’t so damn menacing.

“But that comes with a cost,” Tony continues. “I think I’m starting to get this now. You can control energy, but am I right in assuming that’s not always a safe thing to do? Mess around too much and it builds up inside you. The inert magic.”

“Very good,” Loki murmurs.

“Yeah, and that’s just with my underdeveloped human brain. Pretty impressive, huh? I’m also guessing you think you can outshine yourself and somehow dredge up the power to break your limitations and pinpoint the location of the Tesseract. But how’s this for an idea: we go back to New York. That way your antenna will be in range and we’ll have a lot easier time mapping out where we need to go.”

The grin flickers, and falters, and fades. “And then what?” Loki asks, quietly wooden. “If we find the Tesseract, if we steal it back, what do we do with it? What is your grand solution, Tony Stark?”

“I don’t really know,” he’s forced to admit. They never finished this conversation. They never really started it. Loki gave him hints, nothing more, about Thanos and the always-cliché plot to rule the universe: only a few scattered pieces of a puzzle as vast as space itself. “But I’m starting to think the smart thing to do would be to tell the rest of the Avengers team everything we – and by we I mean you – know about what’s going on. Maybe letting Thanos have the stupid thing isn’t such a bad idea. Maybe it’s the worst idea in the history of time. We don’t know, but maybe putting everybody’s heads together we can come up with a plan.”

Not his usual modus operandi, and on some arrogant level it’s a blow to Tony’s pride to even let those words pass his lips in a roundabout plea for help. But if being with Loki for the last two weeks has taught him anything, it’s that when aliens are involved, he’s in over his head. Way over. This is isn’t just the deep end, it’s the goddamn Marianas Trench, and having some other guys in his corner would be a welcome change of pace.

“You truly believe you can stop this.”

The way Loki says those words drops an icy ripple down Tony’s back. Quietly wooden again, and unnervingly blank. “Again, I don’t know,” Tony answers. Maybe too honestly. “But what the fuck good are we if we don’t try?”

Loki’s eyes narrow. He knows that was an exclusive ‘we’.

“You’re welcome to join the good guys at any time. You don’t have to keep up this song and dance of trying to take over the world.”

“I told you, it’s not that easy...”

“Not S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Tony’s quick to clarify. “After all they’ve done for us, I wouldn’t touch those assholes with a thirty-nine-and-a-half-foot pole any sooner than you would. I just mean the other guys like Rogers and Banner that I think we can trust. Rogers has dealt with the Tesseract before, and Banner strikes me as a solid guy with a lot of know-how. And Thor-”

“Thor wants to take it back to Asgard,” Loki snaps. “That is his mission. That is what he will strive to do.”
“And maybe that’s what’ll end up happening,” Tony says, which brings a dirty sneer to Loki’s face. Well, suck it up, buttercup: Tony presses on. “Loki, you may not like it, but we gotta weigh all the options here and pick one. I’m not going to complain about taking this little break we’ve been on, it’s been a good cool-down period to separate us from S.H.I.E.L.D., step back and get our heads straight, but we can’t stay here forever. At some point, we have to act. Either we do this alone, or we do this with the Avengers, but we have to do something. Soon.”

Crossing the room to sit on the couch at Loki’s side is supposed to be a sign of friendship and support. The hand squeezing Loki’s knee is meant to be a gesture of calm and peace.

The shock of inert magic ripping through his veins and setting his blood on fire knocks both those thoughts out of his mind at the speed of light. “Shit,” he breathes, pulling back. Warmth tingles through his body, pin-prickling over his skin, touching every speck of him inside and out with a teasing caress before it settles, pulsing heavily, deep in his core. “You... really were using magic.”

“I told you I was,” Loki mutters.

“A lot of magic.”

“Far more than I would normally attempt in one day.”

“And you still want to push yourself further?”

Magic sparks as he traces his fingers up the outline of Loki’s arm. Even that small point of contact echoes in expanding waves. His touch slides up to Loki’s shoulder and his neck, pressing his hand flat out against cool skin, feeling the surge of energy that buzzes through Loki’s being. Almost like it’s calling to him. Pulling him close...

“It may be possible to persuade me to stop for the time being,” Loki allows.

Loki’s arms are around Tony’s back before Tony even has words to reply, an iron grip dragging him into a kiss that burns and sizzles with electricity. Loki’s lips are on his, tongue slipping past teeth, bodies suddenly tight against each other as the magic surges with need.

“Is this the part of the day you have scheduled to rip each other’s clothes off and fall to the floor?” Tony gasps.

Loki’s answer contains exactly zero words.

ooo

It’s the middle of the night when Loki finally agrees to return to New York. But in the night, in the dark, in their bed, his agreement sounds a little too much like defeat.

Tony doesn’t mention the word ‘stalling’ again, though that doesn’t mean he’s not thinking it. Something’s driving a wedge between Loki and the Tesseract. Thanos. The Chitauri. Thor? The longer Tony weighs the options, the less sure he is about any of them.

“There are a lot of coincidences in my life,” he says instead as a distraction as his fingers comb through Loki’s hair. “All the time. An unusual word pops into my head and then it shows up in something I’m reading the next day. Or I suddenly remember a scene from a movie I once saw, and later that night it’s on TV. I think of somebody I haven’t seen in a long time and within hours he calls me. About a month ago I woke up with this old song in my head, ‘2 Legit 2 Quit’ by M.C. Hammer, and I was humming it all day. That afternoon I got an email from my pal Rhodey. All it said was, ‘Flashback: remember this?’ and then a youtube link. To that stupid song. Is that
“magic?”

“Yes,” Loki answers.

“So I actually have a real superpower.”

“In a sense. You must be more attuned to changes in energy than the average human.”

“A real superpower,” Tony repeats. The power to occasionally accidentally predict irrelevant events. The world’s lamest superpower. “That’s kind of awesome.”

“You merely lack control,” says Loki. “If you could learn how to isolate specific energy signatures, it’s possible you might be able to one day target this ability.”

Tony shifts onto his side, propping himself up with one arm so he can look down at Loki, face to face. “And I could use real, honest-to-God magic,” he says, followed immediately by, “I can’t believe that’s a phrase that just came out of my mouth.”

“I said ‘possibly’,” Loki replies with a teasing smirk. “It may never amount to anything, but you can always try. What you just described, your series of ‘coincidences’, is exactly what magic-wielders of Asgard look for in children when trying to determine natural talent. You may be too old to learn much, as these abilities are best developed in the very young, but it may be interesting to try.”

“Can you teach me?”

The smirk again. The coy twist of Loki’s lips as he reaches up to brush sweat-damp hair back from Tony’s forehead.

His answer is the exact opposite of anything Tony ever imagined himself hearing. “I don’t see why not.”
Never Promised This Would Be Easy

Chapter Summary

After sketching out a tentative deal with SHIELD, Tony 'n' Loki settle in for a slumber party full of magic, movies, and makeovers. Until the ex-girlfriend card comes into play and all alliances are thrown out of whack.

Chapter Notes

I am pretty happy for once with the way this chapter turned out, partly because it's one I've had plotted out *forever* (the makeover discussion is one of only three scenes in the whole story that still remains from my original inception of how this was going to go), but probably more because I actually finished it three days ago instead of three minutes ago in a frantic scramble like I've been doing for the past five chapters. So I hope you enjoy. :)

Only little things have changed: meaningless, insignificant details that might slip unnoticed past somebody less obsessive than Tony Stark. That chair, for example, has been moved. Shoved aside and out of the way so something else could temporarily occupy its space. That pile of magazines used to be on a different table. Two highball glasses, not four, sit on the tray behind the bar, and the cases of computer equipment stacked up against the wall have been rearranged. Case number four shouldn’t be on top. Four goes on the bottom. They have a specific order. But other than that, other than this scattering of minor differences, it’s as if the clone troopers of S.H.I.E.L.D. were never here. Cleared out completely, leaving not even a scratch on the floor.

“So they’re all gone?” Tony asks aloud.

“Yes, sir,” comes the reply from Jarvis. “All S.H.I.E.L.D. agents vacated the premises last Friday. Agent Coulson returned briefly on Sunday afternoon, but has not been back since.”

Tony’s eyes dart over to Loki, who stalks in a shallow arc along the wall of windows, head just cocked to one side. Sensing something? Maybe. When Loki turns around he dips his chin in a small nod of confirmation. Nobody here.

It’s a nail to Tony’s heart being forced to doubt Jarvis on such a simple question, but hey: better safe than sorry after S.H.I.E.L.D.’s been screwing with his stuff.

“So,” he says to Loki, pushing that unpleasant bit of new reality to the back burner for the time being. “Considering we’ve been in New York for about two hours and in the tower going on four minutes now, I estimate we have four more minutes tops before S.H.I.E.L.D. makes a move. You want a snack or something while we wait?”

Loki shakes his head ‘no’. He’s tense. That’s easy enough to see. Hell, he radiates enough charged-up tension to be seen a mile away in the dark, and who can blame the guy? Last time he was in Stark Tower he ended up leaving through a sheet of solid glass. Last time he interacted with
S.H.I.E.L.D. they shoved a HYDRA gun in his face. And before that? Tony remembers all too well the lunar topography of alien scars that ravaged Loki’s chest that first day they spoke in Atlantic City.

“Hey,” Tony tries, stepping closer. “This is going to happen on our terms. We’re the ones with the intel they want, and it’s up to them to give us a fair deal. We won’t take threats, and we won’t take any shit. This is an alliance. Not a surrender. There’s a big difference between those two things.”

“And you think they understand that?” asks Loki.

“They better. Or we can always head right on back out the way we came.”

“You know if they bring the Tesseract with them shifting will not be an option.”

True. But there’s always the classic choice of leaping from tall buildings in a single bound. “Well, you’ll be able to sense its location before it gets too close, right?”

Loki nods, though it’s not the most confident of gestures.

“Can you pick up on its presence now?”

“Approximately two hundred miles to the south-east, and slowly moving in our direction.”

So the Technodrome is in motion, heading back in to dock. Thought the big question now would be, who’s on it, and who might’ve stayed behind in the city as a lookout? Probably...

“Romanoff,” Tony says, which gets him a raised eyebrow from Loki.

“What about Agent Romanoff?”

“Any second now. She’s going to call or override Jarvis’ sound system or crash through one of the windows. I have a feeling. The Force is strong with me today. Just wait.”

Eyebrow still riding high, Loki says nothing, but he does wait. He crosses his arms over his chest, then paces, then yawns as seconds tick by and accumulate into minutes and Tony’s forced to amend his original prediction.

“Okay, make that any minute now. Cut me some slack here; I’m not Loki Skywalker. I’ve always been more the Han Solo type. I just get bad feelings about stuff. One more minute.”

Half a smile hitches on Loki’s lips. The smug bastard. “Oh, but of course. I’m sure if we wait long enough, something will—”

His words are sliced neatly in two by the unmistakable buzz of a cellphone vibrating across a hard surface somewhere nearby.

“Well, would you look at that,” Tony says with a grin. “Sorry, you were saying something about having to wait?”

“Sir,” Jarvis cuts in. “The incoming call is from an unknown number. Shall I block it?”

“No, I got this. I know exactly who it is.”

The phone is the one he left in Atlantic City. Of course it is, sitting there like an unassuming addition to a an end table beside what has to be a deliberately placed, unused coffee mug embossed
with the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo. Subtle. The words ‘Unknown Caller’ illuminate the screen as Tony picks up the phone. (Immediate thought: has anything good ever been on the other end of those words? No, of course not. They’re they exclusive domain of telemarketers and pre-recorded robotic scams. Among other untrustworthy individuals.)

“Natasha,” he says, rolling the name like a pebble on his tongue. He used to think it was a nice name, exotic and pretty, once upon a time. Now it sounds harsh as bristled wire.

On the other end of the line is a beat of silence, followed by a breath. Then, “Not quite.”

And that would be a man’s voice. Okay then. “Agent Phil?”

“Mr. Stark.”

Well, same shit, different pile. “Agent Phil. Long time no talk. It’s been two weeks; I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me. So to what do I owe this honor?”

Coulson’s voice rings with that tinny, distant sound again over another bad connection. Wherever the helicarrier is, their phone service is crap. “You’ve returned to the land of the living. We were worried about you there for a few days.”

“Yeah,” says Tony. “Life in hiding isn’t exactly my thing. After a while I start to miss the glare of the spotlight and the pleasure of having you guys track my every move. So here I am. Back out in the open. Ready to make a deal.”

“I’ll send a car for you.”

“Or you’ll sit back for a sec like a good little negotiator while I list my demands,” Tony counters, and when Coulson inhales, ready to strike that idea down, Tony cuts him off. “Listen, bub. Here’s the thing. Loki and I have successfully escaped from you three times already, and we can do it again just as easily. It’s our game right now. We’re calling the shots. You got that?”

The muffled sound of a hand sliding over the mouthpiece drowns out any speech on Coulson’s end, and a moment of silence drags out into half a minute. Somebody has to be discussing something in the background. It doesn’t take a genius to guess who or what. When Coulson returns, all he says is a toneless, “Go on.”

“Thanks. Now first, keep in mind that we willingly returned to New York. We willingly came back to place where we knew we’d be found. This is us holding out the olive branch. So any ideas you have of capturing the bad guys? Toss ‘em right now. We’re not here to be captured, but to trade knowledge for security. We can tell you everything you need to know about the Tesseract and the Chitauri. In return, you’re going to call off your witch hunt and let us live like civilized people. Not prisoners. Consultants. As of today, Loki is working with me.”

“And?”

“And,” says Tony, “we’re uninterested in dealing with S.H.I.E.L.D. directly. This project now falls solely under the jurisdiction of the Avengers subcommittee. You hand-picked a group to deal with the problem, so we’re going to deal with it. Alone. And by ‘we’ I mean myself, Loki, Captain Rogers and Dr. Banner.”

“Loki is the problem, Stark. He’s the reason you were called up in the first place.”

“Not any more. We’re looking at something a lot bigger.”
“Bigger than an alien invasion at the hands of your Asgardian friend?”

“Potentially, yes. That’s for the Avengers to know and you to find out. So what’s going to happen is that tomorrow at—”

“We’d prefer to start on this as soon as—” Coulson interrupts, though Tony interrupts right back over top of him.

“Tomorrow at noon you are going to send Rogers and Banner over here to Stark Tower. Tomorrow. Not in an hour, not this evening, not in the middle of the night. You’re working with my schedule and I have other plans for the next twenty-four hours. So tomorrow, Rogers and Banner can arrive by car, or by helicopter, or by Rocketeer jet pack, or they can even take the subway; I really don’t care, but they won’t be allowed in the building before noon. They will also not be allowed in the building if they’re accompanied by any other S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Only Rogers, only Banner, and only tomorrow. If any one of those conditions is violated, Loki and I blow town again until we decide you’re ready for another chance. And you know what? By then it might be too late and Earth might start to resemble a Michael Bay movie. I suggest you take me up on this offer.”

A hand blots out all sound on Coulson’s end again, but this time the pause is longer: a minute or more. Probably close to two. Tony stifles a yawn and glances down at his fingernails, which are too long, and his shoes, which are an old pair he found in Phoenix and scuffed to hell. Both of those things need to be fixed. He’s not technically a fugitive any more and should probably start making an effort at looking like a decent human being. Keeping up appearances and all that jazz.

Coulson’s answer once he resumes the conversation is a single, terse word. “Tomorrow.”

“Is that agreement or a disparaging question?”

“Agreement.”

Aw, somebody’s not too happy about this. Poor little Agent didn’t get his way. “Good to hear,” says Tony, which is a statement could really apply either to the acceptance of his terms or the sulky frustration in Coulson’s voice, now that he thinks about it. “Tell Rogers and Banner I’ll see them tomorrow. Until then? You have yourself a gosh-darn swell day, Agent Phil.”

He ends the call without saying good bye, because that’s how bad guys do it in movies when they’re trying to show somebody who’s boss. They just stop talking, flick the phone off, and then go right back to yelling at their henchmen or plotting to take over the world. Or, in this case, helping a magical alien prevent some other aliens from taking over the world. He fixes Loki with a sly smirk. “All set. Am I an awesome negotiator or what?”

“Do you think they’ll comply with your rules?” Loki asks.

“Of course not. They’re S.H.I.E.L.D.; they’ll try to weasel something past us and push the limits. But as long as I don’t have to deal with Romanoff, it turns out I don’t really care.”

“Hm.”

It’s hard to tell whether that’s a ‘hm’ that means ‘okay’ or one that means ‘I’m still skeptical’. Loki’s face reveals nothing either way. He paces back over to the bank of windows like a dragon on the prowl, surveying his domain. Silently, Tony slides up behind him. Loosely wraps one arm around Loki’s waist. Not a full-on hug – that doesn’t seem right; not yet – but a touch of intimacy all the same.
“What does Asgard look like?” he quietly asks. “Anything like this?”

Loki turns his head to halfway look at Tony from the corner of his eye. Is he surprised at the question? Yeah, maybe. But it shows only briefly in his expression, and he keeps any opinions to himself. “You mean the architecture?”

“Yes.”

“No. Everything here is so... square. Square and glass, all closed in. Asgard has a more organic feel. The buildings flow in curves, lines gliding from one to the next like mountains and seas. Shapes rise up in columns and spires, each distinct from the next but still melding seamlessly together through open plazas and colonnades. Some places are forests of gleaming pillars, while others mimic the arched, skeletal remains of a legendary giant. It’s very different from your world of primitive little boxes. Do any buildings here not have four sides?”

“Uh... this one that we’re standing in right now?”

“Hm,” Loki says again, though this one is clearly an ‘I suppose you’re right’ sort of ‘hm’. “It’s true this is the most imaginative structure I’ve seen so far.”

“Of course it is,” says Tony. “I designed it myself.” Obviously.

“It has something of the look of Asgard to it. The asymmetrical rise. The shape of this room. The style of the floor and walls. But in Asgard, all of this glass would be absent, leaving us open to the air.”

Safety regulations and the concept of wind-tunnel death traps must not exist on Asgard. “No thanks,” Tony replies. “I like my safely glassed-in little compartment. Less chance of drunkenly stumbling off the balcony and ending up as roadkill on Park Avenue.”

Loki smirks. “You have no sense of adventure.”

“Is that a challenge?”

The wicked grin that grows out of Loki’s smirk says yes. Yes, that was a challenge.

“Okay, smartass, you’re on. As of right now, it’s officially Adventure Time with Loki the God and Tony the Human.”

“What type of adventure?”

“A perilous quest the likes of which you’ve never seen. It’s called ‘let’s make ourselves look respectable for our guests tomorrow’. Part one is ‘Tony seeks out a haircut, a manicure and a straight razor shave from the mythical men’s spa that plays sports on big TVs’, followed closely by ‘Loki unlocks the mystery of the Amex of Darkness so he can buy new clothes’. You in?”

“I am in,” Loki answers.

Then let the fun begin. “Jarvis?” Tony calls out.

“Yes, sir?”

“Call down to the garage and have somebody pull a car out front for me. The M5. Loki and I have some serious business to attend to.”

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It’s not a long adventure. They’re home by seven, sitting in front of the gas fire with a jug of chocolate milk and a family pack of Twizzlers, collection of shopping bags spread out in a straggling archipelago at Loki’s back. It’s time for a new quest now. This time, it’s the quest of teaching Tony Stark how to unleash his inner wizard.

“What are you thinking?” Loki asks.

Difficult question to answer, that. What is Tony thinking, exactly? This is stupid comes to mind, along with We’re making no progress at all and Maybe if you told me what to do, things would go faster. But those are all new thoughts brought on by Loki’s question. Before that, what was he thinking?

“Well, I seem to have the Ghostbusters theme song stuck in my head.”

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“No. Nothing special.”

“And where is this song coming from?”

“Who knows? Maybe Ghostbusters’ll be on TV later tonight. Or maybe I’m just thinking of it because I saw that guy who looked like Dr. Spengler at the sushi restaurant.”

“I mean where inside you,” Loki clarifies. “Try to find the source. A place in your brain is producing this thought. You need to locate it.”

“A place in my brain,” Tony repeats. Okay. A place in his brain where a single thought originates. One speck of a place, traced through the web of sparks and nerves in an effort to pinpoint its source. Only this feels like trying to pull a sliver with salad tongs; his search mechanism is clumsy and untrained, pawing over vast swaths of consciousness in a single swipe. As graceful as a Mack truck. “Give me a hint?” he asks. “Seriously, it feels like the song is coming from my mouth, because I keep humming it.”

“You’re concentrating too hard,” says Loki. “This needs no strong thought. Only accurate thought. Let your intuition guide you, slowly and carefully, one tiny step at a time. Imagine your fingers are sifting through a stack of papers one by one. Those papers are all the thoughts and memories stored in your head, and you need to pluck out the right one.”

“Amongst the hundreds of trillions of synapses?”

“I never promised this would be easy. Nor did I say you would be quick to master the skill. In fact, I think I implied the opposite. You have a long way to go, Tony Stark, and this step is only the beginning. It may take years before you manage any progress at all, if you ever make any progress at all. Right now, the only thing you can do is attempt to locate the place in your brain that is sensitive to these subtle fluctuations in energy. It exists, and if what you told me about the frequency of your ‘coincidences’ is true, it is already stronger and more developed than what we would see in most humans. Remind yourself of that fact whenever you feel discouraged. But it will be impossible to move on before you find this place. You need to know where it is before you can start attempting to control its actions. Once you know where you need to focus your attention... you can slowly train yourself to read energy waves as easily as you can now clench your stomach or hold your breath.”

“So I just have to keep trying?”

Loki pours himself another glass of chocolate milk to finish off the jug. “Yes. But not right now.
By now, the song has spread beyond its point of origin to other areas. However, next time you have a thought or memory seemingly out of nowhere, immediately try to trace its provenance. Eventually you will succeed.”

Tony nods, though in all honesty he’s starting to feel like a skeptic again. There has to be a better way to do this than by waiting around for a chance to play trial and error. Like maybe with a neural imaging scan that shows him exactly where to look for this elusive magic brain spot? Might be worth a shot. Nothing in the rules says medical science can’t help with magic, right? Though maybe he’ll refrain from mentioning that possibility to Loki until he’s had a chance to try it out. You never know what space Vikings might consider cheating, after all.

“Do you realize you’ve consumed almost a whole gallon of chocolate milk by yourself in less than an hour?” he says instead to change the subject. “I only had one glass.”

“I’m hungry,” Loki replies with a look that sits somewhere on the spectrum between sulk and pout.

Fair enough. It is eight o’clock, after all. “Point taken,” says Tony. “Jarvis? How about you order us in something for dinner. Something interesting. Surprise me.”

“I have a note you made last month regarding a new Thai restaurant you wanted to try,” Jarvis suggests.

“Yeah, sounds good. Get a bunch of everything. Meanwhile,” he adds, turning back to Loki, “I’m going upstairs to get changed. After a week of sweats and t-shirts, these clothes with buttons are too structured. I think I now know how dogs must feel when they’re forced to wear sweaters. So let me slip into something more comfortable. And by that I mean pajamas. And by pajamas I mean boxer shorts. Back in a sec.”

S.H.I.E.L.D. replaced the window in the bathroom. Why that’s the first thing Tony goes to check on once he’s upstairs is anyone’s guess, but the bathroom draws him in like a magnet before he even has a chance to consider what he’s doing. Everything’s back in place. Bottles back in the cupboard under the sink, hair ties and curling iron back in drawers, glass back in the wall. Exactly as if Tony never attempted some homemade explosives, and Loki never dragged him through a hole of broken window shards.

(Did it even happen? Was that real? Or a drunken, drug-addled dream? Did he hallucinate the whole thing? Parts of it? Maybe he only made it halfway to the bathroom while crawling across the bedroom floor. Maybe he passed out right here, right next to where he just kicked off his shoes, and Loki found him there and spirited him away. Maybe he didn’t even make it that far, and the drugs got the better of him while he was still in bed. His last certain memory is talking to Pepper. Everything after that is so fuzzy, like a grainy, hand-held Super 8 movie playing in his brain at double time, skipping ahead here and there over scenes he just can’t recall.)

He shuts off the bathroom light and closes the door.

(It was real. He’s going to choose to believe it was real. Everything he said, everything Loki did, everything that happened... It was real. Loki risked everything to save him. It was real.)

He unbuttons his shirt and shrugs it off, steps out of his pants, and shakes the watch from his wrist. Opens the dresser drawer for a clean pair of shorts. The selection seems limited to bright yellow, a horrible pastel plaid, motorcycle print, or Saint Patrick’s Day shamrocks. Did S.H.I.E.L.D. steal all his underwear or something? Or is this just the bottom of the barrel before
laundry day? Son of a bitch. Shamrocks it is. Maybe they’ll go with Loki’s inexplicable fondness for Thai elephants.

What he really needs is one of those burgundy velvet smoking jackets like his dad used to have. To class things up a bit.

“Okay,” he calls out to Loki as he comes down the stairs, “you better be wearing those silk elephant shorts again, because I’m going to feel like a real dick if you’re-”

Sitting there offering the bag of Twizzlers to somebody who looks an awful lot like Pepper. There’s a profile with familiar eyes and nose. Slick red lipstick. Ginger-blond hair pulled back into a sleek braid.

Oh. Oh... Yeah, that pretty much makes him feel like a dick. A stunned and confused dick.

“Pepper,” he barely manages to squeeze out.

“Tony!” she replies, voice full of an overenthusiastic lie as she stands up to greet him. “What an interesting surprise. I really wasn’t expecting you.”

“Uh. Right. I really wasn’t expecting...” Any of this. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here.” The tight smile on her face drops into a look of suspicion as she gives him the once over from head to... shamrocks.

Fuck. He really does need a smoking jacket. But all that’s handy is the leather coat he wore out earlier, tossed down over a chair next to the elevator, and there’s no way boxers with leather looks any less ridiculous than boxers alone. So he crosses his arms over his chest, stands his ground, and defiantly pretends he doesn’t feel like a complete goddamn idiot.

Meanwhile, Pepper just looks away. “I checked into a hotel after our... discussion,” she adds in explanation. “To avoid any awkward meetings.”

(Like this one we’re having right now, is the unspoken implication.)

“But when Phil called two days later asking if I knew where you were, I assumed you’d taken off and it was time for me to return. What are you doing here?”

“I also live here,” says Tony. “When I’m not running around the country with the dogs of Fury on my tail, I like to kick back in my luxury penthouse and drink chocolate milk with my Asgardian pal, Loki. We’re having a nice, relaxing evening. Might watch a move later. I’m thinking Ghostbusters, but an argument could also be made in favor of Raiders of the Lost Ark. So, um. Can we talk in private for a minute?”

The way she pointedly stares down at his shorts again makes it pretty clear she has the wrong idea about what kind of ‘talk’ this will be, but nonetheless follows him over to the bar with a world-weary sigh.

“It’s not that kind of talk,” Tony quickly adds. “Don’t worry. I’m safely ensconced in a very absurd rebound relationship and I promise I’m not about to try anything.”

“Rebound with-” Pepper starts, and those words are all she needs before sudden understanding (and probably also some alarm) lights up her eyes. “Oh my god!” she hisses. “Are you and...?” Her braid spins around like the needle of a compass homing in on north as she turns for a quick glance at Loki before whipping back to stare Tony down.
“Hey, I said ‘absurd’, didn’t I?” is Tony’s feeble reply to that fire-eyed glare.

Lucky for him, it only lasts a second longer before Pepper shakes her head. The tension drains from her lips, and she presses a hand to her forehead. “I know I should probably be shocked or upset, but really... I’m not. I want to be upset. I think I should be upset. But it’s your life, and you can do what you want, and at least now I know what constitutes ‘normal’ for you: hooking up with a gay alien supervillain.”

And hell if she doesn’t have a knack for making everything seem ridiculous. “Well of course it sounds weird when you put it that way.”

“Which other way could I possibly put it, Tony?”

“Um,” he says. “You could suggest that I’m introducing said supervillain to the wonderful kaleidoscope of Earth culture and thereby saving the world.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Saving the world? With your dick?”

“Oh come on. You always knew it would happen.”

She was supposed to laugh at that. She doesn’t laugh at that.

“Are you planning on staying here tonight?” she asks quietly, shifting her gaze down to the floor and resting her hands on her hips.

“Yeah,” Tony answers. “This is my building, after all. It has my name on it and everything. It’s labeled. Really can’t get any more mine than that, so I think it’s appropriate for me to stay here. But as a show of good faith, I’ll put all my crap in one of the spare rooms and stay out of your way. I’m not here to bug you. I’m technically here to bug S.H.I.E.L.D.. I did invite some guys over tomorrow to have a nerd party and talk about extraterrestrial quantum physics, but as long as you’re cool with that, I think everything should work out.”

The pause that stretches on after he looks to her for an answer might just be the longest in the history of their relationship, which is seriously nothing short of amazing considering how deeply experienced Pepper is in paralyzing Tony with her silent, titanium-clad stare.

“And Jarvis ordered a bunch of Thai food for dinner?” Tony tacks on. “It’ll be here any minute.”

“Okay,” Pepper finally allows. “I have my doubts, but... Fine, let’s try. I’m too tired to want to go to another hotel anyway.”

So that’s how Tony ends up sitting in a prickling triangle with Pepper and Loki, eating som tam and masaman curry off paper plates while trying to think up inoffensive answers to bland small talk.

“So...” Pepper begins. “Did you two do anything interesting today?”

She’s aiming the question at Loki, looking in his direction as she speaks, but Tony answers first.

“The usual. First we had manicures, then got our hair done. I took Loki to a Japanese restaurant for lunch and he ate over two hundred dollars worth of sashimi. Would’ve had more, too, but the waitress started giving us weird looks.”

“I liked that food,” says Loki.
“He likes raw stuff,” Tony explains to Pepper. “Anyway, then we went shopping, and finally, after all that rugged adventuring, we were both feeling the need to assert our masculinity for a while, so we drove up to Connecticut to see how fast we could go before getting a ticket. As it turns out: a whopping eighty-three miles an hour. We came home in disgust shortly thereafter.”

“Oh.” The look on Pepper’s face says loud and clear that she doesn’t know how to respond. She settles on a vague nod, then eats another prawn before circling back into small talk. This time definitely aimed at Loki. “But you got your hair cut. It does look a little shorter, now that I think about it.”

Loki nods while swallowing a mouthful of rice. “I wanted it shorter still, but Tony Stark said no.”

“That’s because the haircut you wanted from the magazine would’ve made you look like a cutthroat Reagan-era investment banker,” Tony interjects. “The whole purpose of today’s adventure was to give you a makeover to look less like a threat to S.H.I.E.L.D..”

“...Makeover?” Pepper asks.

“Yeah,” says Tony. “He needs to dial down the aggression and go for a softer style if he’s going to convince Coulson and Romanoff he’s not a murderous psychopath any more. We’re aiming for a socially awkward humanities professor kind of look. I bought him some sweater vests.”

Loki actually **growls** over his food, sounding uncannily like his Jotun self for a moment. “I am not wearing those.”

“Well you’re not wearing that shit you bought while I was trying on shoes,” Tony shoots back before turning to Pepper. “I let him hold my wallet for twenty minutes, and he comes back with skinny jeans and a gold sequined mini dress.”

“I told you,” Loki sneers, “the ridiculous rules you cite for women’s clothing versus men’s clothing are utterly baseless and arbitrary. There would be no such question on Asgard. Everything I purchased would be considered men’s clothing.” And then Loki also turns to Pepper, the safely neutral third party. “He’s worried I’ll look like a **homosexual**.”

“No, I’d actually be thrilled if you looked like a homosexual, because gay guys have a reputation for good fashion sense. You look like a hipster in a dress.”

“It’s a sleeveless tunic!”

“It’s covered in sequins!”

“It looks very similar to a coat I once had back home!”

“And has a low back that dips all the way to the waist!”

“Then I defy you to explain how it could possibly be worn by a woman! Her undergarments would show!”

Abruptly, Pepper jumps to her feet. “I should make some coffee,” she announces.

Both Tony and Loki answer at the same time with one resounding word: “No!”

“O...kay...” She sits back down, looking uncertainly from one to the next.

“I mean... there’s no need for you to go to all that trouble,” says Tony, while Loki speaks over him:
“Coffee is a breakfast drink.”

Funny how things can go from a yelling match to uncomfortable silence in two seconds flat.

“Alright,” Pepper says, trying that small talk thing again and dishing herself out more prawns. “Tony. You said you had people coming over tomorrow?”

“Some of the other Avengers guys,” Tony confirms. “You know. The Team. Important, saving-the-world meeting.”

“And... you want to convince them Loki’s no longer a threat by having him wear a sweater vest?”

“Again: when you phrase it that way...”

“I still think my hair should be shorter,” says Loki. “I always kept it shorter on Asgard.”

Tony shakes his head. “Your hair looks nice like it is.”

“I thought your beard looked nice as it was,” Loki flips back at him, “but you still shaved almost all of it off.”

“You had a beard?” Pepper asks, wide-eyed with surprise.

“In my fugitive laziness I may have started down a dangerous path toward Commander Rikering myself.”

“Yet you won’t let Loki cut his hair.”

Tony draws a breath, but lets it go without a word. There’s a feeling. An odd little feeling, somewhere in his brain (nope, can’t pinpoint where), that no matter what he says, and no matter what argument he throws out there, Pepper’s going to have something bigger and better to shoot it down. “Um,” he begins slowly. “It’s not that I won’t let Loki...”

“Your exact words were, ‘No, you can’t cut your hair that short’,” Loki says. “Followed by a statement that I would look, if I may quote you again, ‘like a douchebag’.”

Pepper frowns. “No. No, Loki, I think you’d look nice with shorter hair. Maybe about here.” She holds a finger up level with her earlobe, then tilts her head to the side like she’s picturing the change in her mind’s eye. “That, to me, would say ‘socially awkward humanities professor’. Tony? Don’t you agree?”

“You’re doing this to prove some meddlesome point,” he mutters through half-pursed lips.

And what a sweet smile from such a vicious girl. “I’m only offering a helpful opinion. And Loki, did you know I used to cut Tony’s hair from time to time? It’s true. When he was too busy to stop fooling around with whatever he was doing for two hours to go to a barber, he got me to cut his hair while he sat at the computer like a lump on a log.”

Loki’s smile is no better than Pepper’s. “Is that so?”

“You’re both trying to prove a meddlesome point, aren’t you?” asks Tony.

“Oh, quit whining,” Pepper says as she stands. “You did say ‘makeover’. A sweater vest only goes so far. Let me get the scissors.”

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In all fairness, if Tony’s forced to really think about it, and really look at things objectively, Pepper did a nice job on Loki’s hair. Not that he doesn’t already miss the way that floppy space mullet used to fall across Loki’s face, and the way it dried in loose, erratic ringlets after a shower, and (especially) the way those long curls tickled his cheek and nose, filling his head with the scent of coconut as he pushed up against Loki from behind. But really, fairly, this is good, too. Pepper was right. Jaw-length fluffy guinea pig hair cuts Loki’s intimidation factor in half. He looks younger. Calmer. Softer and almost innocent.

And shorter hair has one very nice side effect of exposing the back of Loki’s neck, gleaming ethereal blue-white in the light of the arc reactor, to Tony’s exploratory kisses.

“I could get used to this,” he murmurs. And feels a gasp and a shudder ripple through Loki’s body when the tip of his tongue traces the column of Loki’s spine. “You? Do you like it?”

“Mm,” Loki breathes.

Yeah. He likes that. He likes any feathery touch to his neck, or his ears, or his eyelids, or the underside of his jaw. He likes the reverential little kisses Tony leaves there. A tiny brush of lips against pale satin skin.

He also likes how the palm of Tony’s hand slides flat down the length of his torso, over the rigid muscles of his chest and belly before dipping lower. He likes to be teased as much as Tony likes to tease him. He likes the anticipation. He likes the buildup. He likes to be worked up and slowly stoked into a frenzy, pushed almost to breaking point. Then a torturous pause. Then starting all over again.

Tony’s always been a physical person, a hands-on person, learning through touch. He sees with his fingers as much as with his eyes. He wants to feel shapes and angles and curves and firmness in his grasp. He wants to know everything by look and by feel both, and there’s always something new to learn.

There’s always another piece of knowledge hidden in Loki’s writhing body, in the way he surges into Tony’s thrusts, and in the secret code of his breathless moans.

“One day,” Tony hisses, teeth scratching against Loki’s earlobe, “I will make you scream my name.”

Loki’s answering laugh comes ragged on the tail end of a gasp. “You will?”

It’s a promise. Tony squeezes the hand that cups the back of Loki’s thigh, fingernails sinking into soft flesh. “I will.”

“Then you would be the first,” says Loki. “But... oh...” The animal noise boiling up from the back of his throat as Tony bites down hard on his neck rips through any civilized words. “...You are very welcome to try.”
That's How the Adventure Ends

Chapter Summary

Truthfully, Tony didn’t anticipate that the Avengers having a meeting in his dining room would be so drawn-out and aggravating. But neither did he anticipate that Loki would be the person to solve all the world’s problems. (Or at least this one very specific problem involving the Tesseract.)

Chapter Notes

Ugh, you guys, I am so sorry this took so long to post! Mostly I’m late because I spent the last week out of the country being drunk and rowdy with my drunk and rowdy friends for my birthday (which is actually next week, but partying doesn’t always conform to the rules of the calendar). Then things happened. I had a draft before I left, but decided I hated it and rewrote large portions while sitting in the airport on the way down. Then I decided I hated that, too, and cut a bunch of stuff and rewrote more on the plane back. Third rewrite happened when I realized that hungover airplane writing just really, really sucks and largely makes no sense. And finally, I scrapped almost everything once more because it seemed “off” and I didn’t like the character interaction, and I redid this version last night after work. I think I’m satisfied with the content and direction of the chapter now, even though it in no way resembles anything I had planned, or maybe I’m just at saturation point and can’t screw around with it any more. Either way, here you go, only four days late!

Next chapter will be on time, so help me, God of Mischief...

It’s not like Tony thought the Avengers Official Team Meeting was going to be a jolly ol’ time, per se. Stiff. He was expecting stiff and halting, with a lot of uncertain gazes down at tightly clasped hands as they worked out the kinks of how the hell they’re supposed get along. He was gearing himself up for maybe a couple sniping insults, some dirty looks, and a mentally shaken fist or two. But on the whole, he honestly thought they would be able to work past their differences to some degree and get shit done. Really, how difficult can it be to come to an agreement on what needs to happen with an incredibly dangerous alien artifact that’s about to trigger a hostile invasion from outer space?

As luck would have it, such a thing turns out to sit somewhere between ‘incredibly’ and ‘completely’ on the difficulty continuum. It’s three in the afternoon. They’ve been at it for hours. So far Tony’s had four cups of coffee (which isn’t nearly enough, because he can’t seem to stop yawning) and his brain is 95% checked out of the conversation. To the point where he’s started doodling ideas for new armor components on the back of the notes Bruce gave him instead of listening as Steve asks Thor and Loki, for at least the fifth time, to stop kicking each other under the table like a couple of first-graders.

Then again, if Tony really thinks about it and takes into account who’s involved, should he be at
all surprised that nobody trusts anybody else and so far all they’ve managed to definitively agree on is that it’s Steve’s job to keep record of the meeting minutes because he has the best handwriting?

He glances up just in time to see Thor jump to his feet, hammer in hand, while a ball of flame flickers to life at Loki’s fingertips.

Nope. Not surprised. Not at all.

“Guys...” Steve groans in that frustrated, so-help-me-children-I-will-turn-this-car-around way of his. The first time Thor threatened to tear Loki’s tongue out and Loki retaliated with an attempt to set Thor on fire (again) was nerve-wracking. This time? This time, it’s just another minor annoyance.

“Can we stay on track, please?” asks Bruce. His tone is more just-you-wait-until-your-father-gets-home. “Let’s get back to what we’re supposed to be talking about, and Tony, are you even paying attention?”


“So you heard everything about the portal and the Chitauri and Selvig’s theories.”

“All that and more,” he confirms with a nod. Including the hour-long argument where Bruce and Steve did nothing but waffle back and forth on whether or not HYDRA technology could ever be safely modified for non-combat use. “You want me to repeat it all back to you, or just the parts where we actually discussed something useful? Because I’ve got all six of those useful words down pat.”

“So we wasting your time, Stark?” snaps Steve.

“Let’s just say you’re not enhancing it.”

Steve’s eyes narrow into ribbon-thin slits. “Yet I don’t hear you contributing anything to the conversation,” he says. “Agent Coulson gave us the impression that you and Loki had made a deal to pass along everything you know in exchange for a pardon. So far, you haven’t offered up a thing, and Loki hasn’t said a single word that wasn’t a threat of some kind. I thought we’d be getting a lot more than this.”

“Really?” says Tony. “I thought I’d be getting less. I have this distinct memory of only inviting you and Banner over, but it turns out I got the ‘order two Americans, we’ll send you one Asgardian free’ TV special offer.”

“Are you deliberately trying to be antagonistic?”

“No, he’s not,” Bruce cuts in, shaking his head. Saint Bruce: the calm guy of the group. How’s that for irony? “We’re all a little on edge today, jumping down each other’s throats...” He shoots a sidelong glance over his shoulder in Loki and Thor’s direction when he says that. “Let’s just pause for a sec to take a breath, calm down, and not let the situation get the better of us.”

“Mm,” says Loki. “You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Dr. Banner?”

“Yeah,” Bruce replies, neither flinching nor backing down from Loki’s diamond-hard glare. “I would know about that. So why don’t we all put in the same effort that I’m giving this, and try to
get along?”

For once, Thor is the first to nod in agreement. “Dr. Banner is right. We are wasting too much valuable time on minor details and differences.”

“How about a five minute break,” says Bruce. “Get another coffee, stretch our legs, clear our heads. Okay?”

The law of probability just about guarantees that it’ll take way more than five minutes to clear anybody’s head, but at this point Tony’ll take what he can get. Even five minutes of relaxation is better than nothing. So while Thor goes for more coffee, and while Loki buries his nose in the book he’s had tucked under his arm all day, Tony leans back in his chair and shuts his eyes. *I never should’ve suggested this meeting,* says the voice in his head that only ever tells him plans are a bad idea once they’re already in motion. The hindsight voice. *Why did I think this would be a good idea? It’s not a good idea. I should’ve invited Banner alone. The two of us could’ve banged out a plan in five minutes and spent the rest of the day playing Halo. But Rogers and Hammerstein here...*

Right on cue, somebody who sounds a lot like the Rogers half of that duo mutters quietly in his ear. “Sorry,” the voice says in a grudging tone. “I know everybody’s acting a little childish. We got off on the wrong foot.”

“Was there ever a right foot in this scenario?” Tony asks.

“Maybe not. But Dr. Banner is right. We need to at least make an effort to get along, and I’m willing to start over, clean slate, if you are.”

A clean slate. Who the hell still uses slates? Or even knows what a slate is these days? Yawning, Tony drops his head to the side to look at Steve. “That’s a little Laura Ingalls Wilder for my tastes, but I may be able to offer you a clean iPad. Only I keep coming back to this time about a week ago when you refused to get me bacon for breakfast.”

“You were drunk, Stark.”

“I don’t see how that would have any impact on my ability to eat bacon.”

“You really want me to...” He lets that thought fade away though, because in the fine art of negotiation, bacon trumps logic. “Fine,” Steve sighs. “Bacon it is.” He picks up a pen and writes out, in that brass plate, grade school teacher handwriting of his across the back of one of Bruce’s note pages:

_To Tony Stark_

IOU: bacon.

_Signed,_

_Steve Rogers_

_July 27, 2012_

In response, Tony takes the pen and splashes his illegible engineer’s scrawl beneath Steve’s date:

_You’re on._

_Tony Stark_

“We’re good?” asks Steve.

With a silent nod, Tony folds up the paper and sticks it in his pocket. They’re good. Not quite
friends – Tony’ll wait on the bacon for that – but at least they can be friendly coworkers. The kind of coworkers who nod in the hallway and mutter something that sounds like an even less articulate version of ‘sup and maybe grunt a few words about weekend plans on the elevator.

“So,” says Steve, now that they’ve established the boundaries of their fledgling relationship. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Strictly speaking, that’s why we’re all here. To answer each other’s questions.”

“It’s not that kind of question. Just.. um. Why is Loki wearing-”

Ah. That question. Holding up a hand, Tony interrupts him before he can say anything more. “How about let’s not go there. We had a fight about this yesterday in Neiman Marcus, and another fight about it over dinner last night. Result? If Loki wants to wear a sequined dress with his hipster pants and cardigan, I’m pretty sure no force on Earth is going to be able to stop Loki from wearing a sequined dress with his hipster pants and cardigan. Leave it at that.”

“It’s... an interesting look.”

“Uh-huh.” And to think Loki chose it over the classic style of an argyle sweater vest and some permanent press wool Sunday school pants. “But speaking of interesting,” says Tony, motioning with his chin in Thor’s direction, “since when do you have a Sweet Valley Twin?”

The frown on Steve’s face makes him look even more like Thor, which is a pretty impressive accomplishment considering they’re both decked out in cute little matching outfits of beige pants and button-down gingham shirts. Thor even has his hair neatly combed and parted down the right side, just like Steve, and slicked back into a little nub of a ponytail.

“What, did I just break the first rule of borrowing Captain America’s clothes? Nobody talks about borrowing Captain America’s clothes?”

“Nobody else had anything that came close to fitting him,” Steve answers with a hint of a sulk.

Should’ve taken the God of Thunder shopping for his own sequined dress. “And let me guess,” Tony adds. “Coulson may have encouraged him to tag along because, technically, he’s not a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, so, technically, his presence isn’t in violation of the terms I laid out yesterday.”

Steve nods. “Something like that. But he wanted to come, and I think it’s fair that he did, since he’s here for Loki and this is where Loki is. And the guy knows a lot about the Tesseract. He’s been helping Selvig and Banner this past week.”

“So he knows how to open the portal to Asgard?”

“Not exactly,” Steve sighs.

Which brings everything right back around to square one, and just in time for Bruce to start up the meeting again. “Alright, we ready to get going? Everyone refreshed? Nobody feeling the urge to set anyone else on fire?”

“It’s only ghost fire,” mutters Loki, voice muffled by the barrier of his book.

“Ghost fire?” Bruce repeats.

“Ghost fire burns energy rather than matter,” says Thor.
“Entirely harmless,” Loki confirms. Then shrugs. “In itself, that is. It causes no physical damage. Of course one can still feel its burn, but all recorded fatalities due to ghost fire are suicides by those driven mad enough to kill themselves to escape the pain.”

Thor looks about ready to say something in response to that, but, to his credit, bites back what would have no doubt been some very choice words and lets Bruce continue.

“So to recap and move along,” Bruce begins, without stating outright the implied qualifier of ‘because we keep getting side-tracked’, “and to put us all on the same page, ever since we picked up Dr. Selvig and the Tesseract, he and I have been working to recreate a smaller scale model of the portal device he was constructing at Brookhaven. The ultimate goal behind that is to create a link to Asgard. Thor has been helping me wherever possible.”

“Yeah, but who gets to make the call of whether or not to send the Cube back with Thor?” Tony asks. “I think that’s the big problem we have to tackle before this meeting can go any further.”

Bruce’s answering expression is neither a smile nor a frown, but something uncertain in between. “That would be the million-dollar question. Naturally Fury wants to keep it here, but Thor’s made some good arguments in favor of taking it back to Asgard with him, and from the sounds of things a couple of the S.H.I.E.L.D. bigwigs are on Thor’s side. Everyone’s divided on whether we keep the Tesseract here or get that thing as far away from our planet as possible.”

Far away. Tony’s vote is for as far away as possible. Make it Asgard’s problem. If he never hears the word ‘Tesseract’ again, it’ll be too soon. “How long before the portal is operational?”

This time, Bruce’s expression is a definite, negative frown. “That’s what we don’t know,” he sighs. “Dr. Selvig claims the calculations we’re using are right, the construction is correct, the materials are identical, but... we can’t get it to work. On paper, it should work. In practice? During our first test we were able to open a minor portal very briefly, and two of those aliens that matched the corpses Coulson brought back from Brookhaven came through. Chitauri. But ever since, we’ve got nada. The machine works, the Cube starts to glow brighter, but nothing happens. Something’s missing.”

“Probably magic,” says Tony, at which Bruce cracks a small grin. He thought that was a joke.

“Anyway,” Bruce continues, “that was a couple days ago. Since then, Selvig and I have been trying to figure out where we went wrong by looking back and retro-engineering some of the Tesseract tech that does work. Namely the HYDRA guns. We’ve dismantled them, rebuilt them, looked at S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new models, even made some improvements and updated prototypes. But whatever powers those guns and whatever powers the portal? They’re two completely separate functions. On the one hand, the Tesseract as an energy source is fairly easy to tap. The Tesseract as a gateway through space, though... We’re a long way off from understanding how that works.”

“You’re back to scratch with your portal to Asgard, then,” Tony says.

“Yeah. But Thor’s had some good ideas, and if we keep at it-”

“Oh, keep at it all you like,” Loki murmurs from behind his book; “you’ll still be wrong.”

A tiny muscle twitches in Bruce’s jaw. That’s all, nothing more, but it’s enough to make Tony sit up straighter and pay attention. “Loki...” he warns.

“No, it’s okay,” says Bruce. “I can take somebody being a bit of a jerk to me. As long as that jerk explains what he means and can back up his accusations with solid evidence. So, Loki? Care to
“Gladly,” Loki replies, and his haughty smirk says he means it. “Your problem, Dr. Banner, is an incorrect assumption of what the Tesseract is. You see it as having two functions as either an energy source or a gateway, yet neither of those observations is exactly correct. In reality, it is far more advanced. Certainly outside anything you’ve ever encountered before.”

“So what is it?” Bruce asks. The hardness in his voice holds a healthy level of skepticism for whatever Loki’s vaguely trying to say.

Loki smiles, going straight for the answer he seems to know nobody’s going to be able to wrap their heads around. “A semi-sentient form, capable of producing, storing, and using its own energy. It cannot necessarily think for itself, at least not new thoughts, but it can expand upon and amplify the thoughts of living beings who know how to control it. Do you understand that?”

Quickly, Bruce shoots an uncertain glance over in Tony’s direction. “I...”

“No, of course you don’t,” says Loki. “Nothing like this has ever existed within your reality. The Tesseract is power. And when I say ‘power’ I do not mean anything as crude as your electricity and the ability to light up a city. I mean anything you can imagine. Quite literally: anything you can imagine. Let us take, for example, the power I demonstrated earlier when Thor threatened me with bodily harm and I conjured that fire to defend myself.”

“Don’t” Thor starts, standing up from his seat with a threat of bared teeth.

“I’m not about to!” Loki snarls in return. “It was merely an example! We are talking, Thor. Not acting. Were we acting, and I had I the power of the Tesseract at my disposal, I could easily conjure an inferno to engulf this tower completely while expending only the same amount of my own energy as it takes me to call up one little flame now. Similarly, within the limits of my own power, at my best I might be able to space-shift to the opposite side of Midgard. Yet working through the amplifying prism of the Tesseract, some weeks ago I was able to open a doorway from the far end of space. Do you see how this works now? And do you see, Dr. Banner, why your own attempts failed? It is not because of any flaw in the design of Dr. Selvig’s device. It is only because you do not possess the natural ability to manipulate the Tesseract’s power to conform to your wishes. No human does. You may harvest energy to create guns and the like – energy which, I might add, is nothing more than a necessary side effect of magical amplification rather than a purpose in itself – but that is as far as your race can ever go.”

“But the first time...” Bruce says, clearly confused. “Dr. Selvig said...”

“When Dr. Selvig built the first device, he was under the influence of the scepter, which linked his mind to mine. To put things plainly, he was a conduit for my abilities and my knowledge. I’m assuming the reason you were able to open a minor portal on your first attempt with the rebuild was because you tried to do so very soon after Dr. Selvig joined you. Before the influence of the scepter had fully faded from his head.”

This is when the look of understanding slowly seeps into Bruce’s face. Not good understanding: not like that ‘a-ha’ moment upon making a breakthrough discovery. No, it’s the slow, crumpling, pathetic realization that everything he’s done was doomed to fail from the start. “So Dr. Selvig and I built a machine that neither of us can use.”

“Exactly.”

“And we’ll never be able to use it?”
“Not on your own, no.”

The silent word formed by his lips is probably a four-letter gem. “Then even if we do succeed in getting this thing linked up to Asgard, and you and Thor go home, we’re left with a doorway that can only be opened from the other side. By you guys.”

Loki nods. “Which is why, I think you’ll now agree, it makes no sense for you to keep the Tesseract on Midgard. It’s far more of a liability to you than a benefit. Anyone with the power to do so can open the door, whether you like it or not; my presence here proves that beyond a doubt. Or someone could potentially do worse.”

“But the energy,” says Bruce. “Fury’s feel-good argument is that the energy that thing puts out – clean energy – could solve a lot of problems based on the world’s current fossil fuel dependency.”

“Captain Rogers already expounded in detail on what that energy can do,” Loki replies with a flick of his eyes at Steve. “It may not be something you wish to introduce to your realm on a wide scale.”

“No,” Steve agrees, though the look on his face seems to indicate he actually suffers physical pain from this odd turn of events in being forced to side with Loki on something. “These guns are enough to deal with. If the Tesseract technology gets out, we don’t know where it’ll stop, and sooner or later, somebody’s going to build a bomb that can wipe a whole city off the map.”

Tony has to cut in here. “As the resident weapons expert, I’m pretty sure we already have bombs like that. Until two years ago, I built them.”

“But like this,” says Steve. “Stark, when I say wiped off the map, I mean completely off. Wherever that beam hits, there’s nothing left. No smoking rubble. No bodies. Everything’s gone. Dr. Banner, you must’ve seen that. Didn’t you test the gun you were working on?”

Reluctantly, Bruce looks up. “I tested it.” He wants to stop there, but Steve’s still eyeing him for a full answer. After a moment, he continues with a hard-put sigh. “Okay, yeah, the Tesseract energy disintegrates anything it touches. No longer there. Gone without a trace. I agree: that’s bad news. But if we can modify it and somehow make it safe?”

“You can always modify anything to make it safe,” Tony tells him. “The thing you have to worry about is somebody else modifying it in the other direction and making it worse.”

“And how might you go about modifying that which you still do not understand?” Loki asks. “All of you know the danger of this energy, but do you have any idea what it truly is? What it does?”

Silence. Tony opens his mouth, but shuts it right back up. Of all the guys in this room, he’s the only one who hasn’t seen the Tesseract up close. He knows the least about it, which bugs, him, but not as much as a similar lack of knowledge seems to be bugging Bruce, who’s been working with the damn thing for two weeks. When nobody speaks, keeping their eyes sullenly glued to the table instead, Loki moves on.

“Dr. Banner, tell me what happens to anything you shoot with those shiny little guns of yours.”

“It vanishes,” Bruce mutters, barely audible over all the tension and mistrust that hums through the room.

“But as a man of science, you know that’s impossible. Matter cannot simply vanish. It must go somewhere.”
“No. We tested every possible variable. We shot that gun at a rock in a vacuum chamber and measured every aspect of the outcome. *Nothing changed.* The rock wasn’t vaporized, no heat was created, it didn’t turn into anything else, it just... It just disappeared. And I know,” he adds, holding up his hands. “According to the laws of physics, that’s impossible, but we tested the same thing ten times and got ten identical results. *Nothing.* So unless you know something I don’t...”

Oh, he does. That little smile on Loki’s face shouts out loud and clear that he knows a hell of a lot of vital information that’s slipped the grasp of everyone else. Of course he does. “All matter must go somewhere. You’ve just not considered how vast an area *somewhere* might be. You said yourself not minutes ago that the Tesseract functions as a doorway. Why would its excess energy be capable of anything less?”

“Wait,” says Steve. “Are you saying that seventy years ago, a bunch of Nazis unwittingly invented a *teleportation ray*?!”

“No, not exactly, but if you were to describe it as such, you would be close enough that I wouldn’t bother correcting you. What they created was a means of focusing what they thought was destructive energy. However, the energy only appeared to be destructive because they lacked the ability to control it. Uncontrolled, it sends whatever it touches to a random, unspecified location. Scatters it. The rocks Dr. Banner shot would have been deconstructed down into individual particles, and each of those particles transported elsewhere. Perhaps inches away. Perhaps to the other side of the world, or the universe. But if I were to use the gun, I’m confident I could control its power and, depending on the precision of the technology, reconstruct the particles of my target in a desired location in something resembling their original order.”

“Yeah that sounds... kind of like a teleportation ray,” Bruce says. If he’s even trying to stop his stunned disbelief from seeping into his words, it’s not working.

For the record, Tony doesn’t blame him. Semi-sentient energy, amplified magic, accidental teleportation rays... If ever there were a time for the phrase ‘what the actual fuck’, this would be it. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this earlier?” he asks Loki.

Loki only shrugs, looking far too casual and unconcerned while he carefully refuses to meet Tony’s eye. “The opportunity never arose.”

Bullshit. What the fuck, exactly, has Tony been asking him about for the past week? The Tesseract? Thanos? His plans for world domination? And what the fuck, exactly, has Loki said about any of that? An incomplete reference to Thanos’ scepter. And nothing else. Nothing coming anywhere near this level of information dump.

All Tony says out loud, though, is, “Oh.” They can leave the rest of this conversation for another time. Sometime when he has a spare hour or four to spend pounding his head against the brick wall of Loki’s shadowy secrecy.

“The point being,” Loki continues before anyone else can make any more inconvenient little comments, “is that of everyone in this room, and I would even go so far as to say of everyone in this realm, I am the only one who can properly channel the Tesseract’s energy. Your efforts will be destructive at worst and uneventful at best. If you wish to open a doorway to Asgard, which I highly suggest you think about doing now that you know just what you have on your hands... well. I am the only one who can do it.”

“But will you?” Thor asks, first to jump on the question that’s in everybody’s mind.

Quietly, Loki leans back in his chair. He folds his hands across his ribs, weaving each finger
together one by one as his eyelids close halfway in a thin gaze. “What might happen if I do?”

“We will return home,” says Thor. “If you do this, Loki, if you can activate the Tesseract and create a bridge, we will return to Asgard. As brothers. As we once were. I will tell father how you aided me here, and I will speak in your favor to all who might doubt you. We will put this all behind us.”

“In Asgard.”

Thor leans forward into a nod, face full of enough earnest good will to fill up a lifetime of Hallmark greeting cards. “In Asgard, brother. Home. All you need do is use the power of the Tesseract through Dr. Selvig’s device and we will be home, with all of our differences in the past.”

“Hm.” Loki’s monosyllabic grunt of a reply is directed down at his lap. He’s turned to look away from Thor, and away from Thor’s eagerly outstretched, empty hand resting between the two of them on the table. As the whole room waits for his answer and the words that can either salvage or break down the fate of the world, he shifts his weight to slouch further in his seat like a bored teenager.

His words are, with an inconsequential little puff of breath, “I suppose I could.”

ooo

And that’s how the adventure ends. Not with a battle. Not with explosions. Not with an alien invasion and hundreds dead and thousands wounded. Not even with a fight. Loki arrived in spectacular chaos, but he’ll leave in quiet obscurity. Just like that. After everything that’s happened, he speaks four unassuming words, ‘I suppose I could,’ and it’s all over. The Avengers win the battle for Earth without a single shot fired. The villain wasn’t outnumbered or overpowered. He just lost interest and gave up. Moved along. Abandoned his unfinished masterpiece of destruction before it had a chance to take flight.

That’s ideal, isn’t it? No damage, no casualties? No controversial story lighting up the six o’clock news and causing mass panic in the streets?

So why does Tony feel so shitty about the whole thing?

“I guess...” he says to Loki in thick words that clog in his throat, “you’ll go back to Asgard... tomorrow.”

Loki, who lies in bed with his naked back pressed against Tony’s chest, shrugs. “I will need to see the state of Dr. Selvig’s new equipment. It may be ready, or it may need some work. But I imagine I should have everything in place within three days at the most.”

“Hm.”

It was only ever a temporary amusement. Tony knows that. Loki knows that. Each knows the other knows that. Nothing more than a fellowship of convenience. Thrown together by chance, on their own for days at a time, of course something like this would happen. Loki’s magic. Tony’s complete lack of willpower. All the circumstances falling into place so that bonds were forced and forged between them. Of course it would happen. But it was never anything more than a little bit of fun. A way to pass the time, really. He always knew it would end. Loki would leave. He’d go back to real life. That’s the way it always had to be.

They were only ever... Just a... (Why can’t he find the right words?)
His hand slides down the gentle curve of Loki’s thigh. Lean muscles under smooth skin tighten in anticipation of his touch. From hip to knee, and back again, his fingers hover at the outline of Loki’s flawless body.

(Going back to Asgard. He’s going back to Asgard.)

He lets his head dip down into the hollow where Loki’s neck meets his shoulder, inhaling the subtle scent of skin and soap. Coconut shampoo. Loki always gravitates to the tropical perfumes. That’s one of a meager smattering of facts he knows about Loki. Loki likes coconut shampoo, raw food, juice boxes, and amaretto. He wears sequins and Howard Stark’s old suits. Those are nice little snippets of trivia, but what about the real questions? Questions of needs and dreams and memories and fears, the questions of Loki as a person with a past and a future rather than Loki the abstract idea? All this time together and Tony never pushed to know what Loki thought or felt. He never really tried to know. He gave up too easily every time his questions rolled off the hull of Loki’s impenetrable, soul-constricting armor, and let himself become shallow enough to be content with Loki’s physical presence only. What else do you need in a finite relationship but that physical fire?

(And now it’s too late for anything else, because tomorrow, or the day after, Loki is going back to Asgard.)

“Loki?” he asks.

The pause in Loki’s breath drags on too long to be natural. Silence. Blank silence. He must know what Tony’s thinking. “Yes, Tony Stark?”

Stay with me, he wants to say. Don’t go back to that dumb planet of yours. I get the impression you don’t like it much anyway. Stay here instead, at least for a while, and I promise to stop being such a dumb fuck-up and do better at actually getting to know you. You can trust me. Let’s ditch the Tesseract on Thor and I’ll take you back to California, where we can spend each day trolling the paparazzi by never wearing any clothes and screwing on every available patio surface. That seems like something you’d like. You can always go back to Asgard later, once the years have rolled by and I’ve turned into the dirtiest dirty old man the world has ever seen and you’re sick of me always trying to cop a feel of your perfect, ageless ass every time you come within grabbing distance. But until then...

It’s just too bad people in these temporary kinds of situations can’t say stuff like that. They need to face reality and play the hand they’re dealt.

“Can we have magic sex tomorrow?”

Loki laughs at that. Has he ever really laughed before? Not his usual condescending chuckle, which he does all the time, but an actual, real, happy laugh? Like a real person?

“Magic sex?” he asks.

“Yeah,” says Tony. “You know, when you’re all wired up on magical energy and everything you touch turns to golden porn and it feels like sex on top of sex? Don’t even think about going back to Asgard before I get a chance to experience that at least once more. Or twice. Actually, can we just spend the whole day alternating between you using a bunch of magic and then us having sex?”

Another laugh. Another quick slice of happiness that’s almost enough to make Tony forget, in this one moment, what the next few days will bring. “I will need to use an exceptional amount of magic in order to fully test the capabilities of the portal,” Loki concedes. “So...”
“You know by now that I make a pretty good bedroom slave whenever you need to rebalance your energy.”

“You do.” Loki turns his head first, glancing back over his shoulder, then the rest of his body follows until he lies looking at Tony face to face. “It will be difficult to leave you,” he breathes, lips catching Tony’s hairline.

Maybe. That might be what he said. It’s so hard to hear over the creak of the bedframe and rustle of sheets and the rush of Tony’s own breath. His heartbeat slamming in his ears. Maybe Loki said that, or maybe he said something else, or maybe he said nothing at all and that teasing phrase was no more than wishful thinking on the part of somebody whose mind is too caught up on impossible scenarios. That's probably it.

So Tony doesn’t answer.
'Loki' is the Elvish Word for 'Snakes'

Chapter Summary

With the Tesseract portal device Selvig built ready to go, all that remains is to test the thing out before Thor and Loki can be on their way back to Asgard. Oh right, and Bruce wants revenge for the previous day's sleights.

Chapter Notes

Final chapter count has been updated. :) I mentioned in a few replies to comments on the last chapter that there would very likely be 24 chapters total, and despite the odds it looks like the plot is actually sticking to my plan, so that estimate is going to end up being true. This is the third-last chapter of the story.

A heartfelt thanks to everyone who has been reading this so far, and I hope you enjoy where the rest of it leads!

Three weeks to the day since Loki was first brought aboard S.H.I.E.L.D.’s helicarrier, he returns. Tony would say that this time he struts in like king of the castle, but in all fairness, he did that the first time, too. So he struts in again. It’s just that now, instead of chains, he’s wearing a sweater vest. Instead of being locked in a cell he’s in an engineering lab, and instead of an escort of armed guards, he has Thor lurking around making that overprotective big brother face and scowling at all the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents through the glass wall. They’ve come full circle and landed back in some strange, alternate universe. It’s the Bizarro Avengers Show, featuring Professor Loki, Evil Tony, the Olsen Twins, and... Okay, Bruce is still the same. Maybe.

“I think I might be turning into Evil Tony,” he says to Bruce as the two of them sit on the counter that spans the lab’s far wall.

“Yeah?” Bruce asks. “How can you tell?”

“I dunno. That’s the tough part. Outwardly, I don’t know if there’d be any signs, since Good Tony already has the devilish facial hair going on. Maybe if I shave it off? Maybe Evil Tony would try to fool everyone with his clean-shaven, suburban dad style?”

“If you start wearing a lot of black leather, I’ll worry.”

Tony nods. “That would also be a good indicator.”

“But does that mean Evil Loki is now Good Loki with his new Harvard law school preppy look?”

“No, he’s still Mostly Evil Loki. You don’t even want to know what I had to bribe him with this morning to get him to wear that outfit.” And by that Tony means, I don’t want you to know what I had to bribe him with this morning to get him to wear that outfit.
Bruce’s wry smile as he leans back against the wall seems to indicate he read too much into that. “Uh-huh.”

Shit. It’s probably best if Tony just leaves things right there. And maybe changes the subject. “So,” he says, looking over across the lab to the Tesseract portal device. “Do you think he knows how to work it?”

The wry little smile on Bruce’s face turns into an all-out grin at the sight of Loki leaning over, experimentally prodding at one of the number pads, and backing up with a frustrated scowl. “After all that garbage yesterday about how we pathetic little humans will never have the ability to master the Cube’s power? I sure hope not. If you watch him closely, it looks like he’s spent the last half hour searching for an ‘on’ switch but is too conceited to ask for help. Unfortunately for him, the startup requires a thirty-seven character security passphrase, then this.” He pulls an LCD key fob out of his pocket and passes it over to Tony. “The fob displays a code that changes every fifteen seconds. You have to enter the first one, the second, and the fourth. If he ever figures that out…”

“What primary power source does it use?”

“Well, that’s the thing. It’s also not plugged in.”

Seriously, Tony shouldn’t be this amused at Loki’s expense. And maybe he should be defending his darling’s honor or something. Chivalry might apply to antagonistic wizards trying to figure out electronic doomsday devices. But to be fair, the bullshit about human inferiority does get pretty tiresome after a while. “Are you going to show him how to use it?”

“Eventually,” says Bruce. “Selvig and I actually ran all our tests at a S.H.I.E.L.D. research site in Pennsylvania, since nothing on this ship is strong enough to get that thing going. Maybe once I’m tired of watching Loki try to get it to work – which will probably take hours, because I find this pretty funny – I’ll suggest we take it back to Stark Tower, wire it into your reactor, and really get things started.”

“Hm. You may want to look into growing a beard. I think you’re turning into Evil Bruce.”

While Bruce answers Tony with a smug smile, across the room, Loki looks like he’s about one step away from picking up Selvig’s machine and hucking it into the ocean. He’s muttering to himself. Tony can see his lips move, but whether he’s just talking things through like a mad scientist or spitting out reams of expletives... He’s too far away to hear.

“Anyway, on a more serious note,” Bruce says, turning the conversation back inward, “do you think he’s really going to do it? Open the portal back to Asgard and leave quietly? Or is this just a big fat red herring before he screws us over?”

Tony sighs. “You’re uncertain about the plan too, huh?”

“Not so much uncertain as uninformed. But now that I hear you say that... yeah, I’m uncertain. You’re the one who knows him best, Tony. I think it should be your call on whether or not we can trust him. Based on what you know, do you think he even wants to go back to Asgard? Or when he gets that portal open, are we going to see Grand Admiral Thrawn and an armada of hostile aliens on the other side?”

“Based on what I know?” Tony echoes back. Based on what he knows...

What does he know? Truthfully? In all honesty? If he steps away and looks at himself, and looks at Loki, what does he know? Anything at all? Can he say, with any sense of surety, that Loki
would or would not do A, B or C in any given situation? Could he even begin to guess what Loki might be thinking, behind that indecipherable veneer of his? Tony’s known people in the past who were difficult to read, but Loki? Loki’s a goddamn manifesto written in a secret alphabet. Paragraph after paragraph is hidden in the straight line of his mouth, the rigidity of his shoulders, and the fiercely guarded depths of his eyes. He bristles with unknown punctuation when he pushes his loose hair back from his forehead or rests his chin on his clenched fist.

What does any of that mean?

It means that Tony Stark doesn’t know shit about the guy who shares his bed every night (and morning, and some afternoons), that’s what it means.

“Tony?” Bruce prods after moments of silence.

“Um,” says Tony, breaking that unpleasant current of thought. “Sorry. I... Yeah, I don’t know if I’m the right person to ask. I’d say of all of us, Thor is the one who knows Loki best. Not me.”

“So you’re saying, since Thor trusts Loki...?”

Yes, except Thor’s shoulders carry the weight of one major tragic flaw: he desperately wants to trust Loki, and is maybe even incapable of doing anything else.

“Let’s just say Thor trusts Loki for now. And we might as well, too. It’s a tough call. On the one hand, he calls himself Loki the Snake and admits he enjoys backstabbing and double-crossing people. On the other, right now, between Thor, the rest of the Avengers, the HYDRA guns, and the Tesseract interfering with some of his magic, he’s outnumbered and outclassed. As long as we keep that balance I don’t think he’ll be able to do too much damage.”

“Loki the Snake, huh?”

“Old nickname from his younger days.”

“I guess that makes sense,” says Bruce. “Did you know: ‘Loki’ is the elvish word for ‘snakes’? Well, actually, ‘lóki’, with a long, acutely-accented ó, but still. Apt name.”

“Really?” Tony asks. “Huh. That might just be the nerdiest bit of trivia I’ve heard all day. But what would make it even more impressive is if you’d said ‘Lóki’ was the quenya word for ‘snakes’. There’s no such language as ‘elvish’, Bruce.”

“Duly noted, hotshot,” Bruce replies with a nod. “Though who’s more nerdy, the nerd or the nerd who corrects his fantasy conlang?”

“Probably the nerd who alters Star Wars quotes to make his point.”

“Yeah, well, pray I do not alter them further.”

At this point Tony probably would have fallen to one knee and proposed that he and Bruce be the grown-up equivalent to science fair partners, except a rule exists stating that where the Avengers are concerned, interruptions happen at the most inconvenient times.

“Guys!” Steve shouts from the opposite corner of the lab. “If work isn’t getting in the way of your personal conversation, do you want to think about helping out here?”

“Sorry, Cap,” Bruce calls back, followed by Tony’s, “Sorry, dad.”
“Can either of you get this thing up and running? We’ve wasted almost an hour.”

Tony doesn’t even need a cue to look over at Bruce in the exact moment Bruce looks back at him. Eyes meet. Damn, it’s hard not to evilly smirk.

“Us?” Bruce asks, eyebrows rising in that beautifully innocent way. “Why would you need us? I was under the impression Loki could take everything from here.”

“Does he look like he’s taking everything from here?”

“I’m fine!” Loki snarls from behind the Tesseract’s pale blue glow.

“Are you sure?” Bruce asks him. “You don’t need me to, say, turn on the power for you?”

The corrosive glare flashing out from Loki’s eyes looks like an intimidation tactic. The kind of intimidation tactic that might work under the normal circumstance of Loki wearing his Asgardian leather and giant helmet. In a sweater vest, though, he looks about as dangerous as a grudge-toting member of the debate team.

“Let me get that for you,” Bruce goes on when Loki remains spitefully silent. “Sometimes you need a pathetic little human’s meager computer expertise to kickstart things. But keep in mind,” he says as he punches in the codes and components begin to light up, “this only activates the battery that powers the start-up mechanics. You won’t be able to run anything more than system diagnostics and a few basic processes to align the beamline magnets until we get this thing hooked up to a real power source. But I can show you how it works. Where do you want your portal?”

Loki manages to hold on to his death-gaze for an impressive full minute longer, while Bruce does nothing but calmly stare back at him.

“I mean, you could stand there all day and shoot eye daggers at me,” Bruce says. “But that’s not going to do a lot of good for either of us. Or you could take a swipe at me with those fists you’ve got bunched down in your pockets, but the other guy wouldn’t like that very much. So how about we do what I suggested yesterday and try to get along like adults. Where do you want your portal, Loki?”

*Somewhere over there, and go fuck yourself,* is the wordless answer in the flip of Loki’s hand before he sullenly stalks away from the Tesseract to sulk at Tony’s side.

“What’s the matter?” Tony quietly asks him. “Hulk got your tongue?”

“I am in no mood for your idiotic jests, Tony Stark,” Loki hisses back.

“Are you going to threaten to make a cape out of my skin or use my eyes as golf balls? Because you know I love it when you talk vicious to me.”

That little lip-twitch there means Loki’s trying real hard not to ruin a good pout by smiling. Goal achieved. But he turns away from Tony before his resolve cracks, watching closely as Bruce steers the portal device into a horizontal position, pointed at the far wall.

“Now if we had the necessary power input,” Bruce explains over the hum of machinery, “it would be possible to focus the length of the portal beam by adjusting storage ring capacity and orientation of the dipoles. We can set a focal point of anywhere from about three and a half meters to... I don’t want to say ‘infinity’, but the upper limit would be determined by the stability of the beam itself. We don’t know what that is until we test it out. Loki? You want to have a closer look before we move on to the next step?”
“No,” Loki coolly replies. “I can see that it works.”

Bruce looks up at him. “You sure? I can show you the controls.”

“I can see everything from here.”

With one of those ‘if you say so’ shrugs, Bruce punches another code into the keypad and the device’s whirring whine begins to slow and its lights fade. “Then I guess the next step is to-”

“Take it outside,” Loki interrupts.

“Outside?” Steve asks with a frown. He glances over at Wondertwin Thor, today dressed in a sky blue button-down shirt contrasting Steve’s brown checks, in a heroic quest for answers. But Thor looks just as confused as everyone else.

“The helicarrier’s generators aren’t anywhere near enough to bring this thing up to full power,” says Bruce. “We need a massive energy source just to push the Tesseract into cyclical sustainment mode.”

“Tomorrow,” says Loki. “Today, we are only testing, and I have no need of any external energy source for the time being. I opened a gateway once already using nothing more than my own strength. All I need now is for you to take this device outside, Dr. Banner. If something goes wrong, if your calculations are incorrect and the beam does not correctly focus, it could cause too much damage if I tried to operate it in here.”

“Loki worried about causing damage,” Steve mutters just loud enough for Tony to hear. “Now that’s a new one.”

“If we set a trial outside, it could serve as a demonstration to all the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. that the device is operational,” Loki continues. “I would think they’d prefer I open the portal under full supervision rather than down here in secret.”

“You can actually do that without the power source?” asks Bruce.

“Do you doubt me, Dr. Banner?”

‘Doubt’ might not be the right word for whatever’s displayed on Bruce’s face as he slowly crosses his arms over his chest and looks away.

“Director Fury?” Steve speaks into his headset. “You copy that request?”

Yeah, he does. Tony’d be too surprised if S.H.I.E.L.D. didn’t have this place wired up to record every sound that passes through the room, down to the smallest sniff of breath and rustle of clothing. Steve’s intent frown as he listens to an answer only confirms that suspicion. Fury, or somebody on Fury’s behalf, has been spying on them since the beginning.

“Oh yes,” Loki adds, addressing Steve now. “And tell them I will need my scepter.”

A moment of hesitation washes all other expression from Steve’s face. “Your...”

“My scepter,” Loki repeats. “It’s rather crucial to this operation, since I cannot physically touch the Tesseract myself without... consequences.”

Again, Steve looks to Thor, who can provide nothing more than a sad shake of his head. He knows exactly as much about that scepter as everybody else, which would be a grand total of nothing
about what it does, nothing about where it came from, and nothing about what Loki might be able
do with it. It’s an unknown variable in their carefully constructed equation.

“Director?” Steve asks the headset. The reply that comes through, hidden in Steve’s ear, is long
and rambling. For several seconds, all he does is bob his head in a constant stream of vacant nods.
“Yes, sir,” is the final reply. Then he turns to Loki. “Director Fury will personal bring the scepter
up to the deck. He’ll let you use it, but he’s warning you that after all the tricks you’ve pulled so
far, there’ll be two dozen guns at your back ready to blast you down at the first sign of any funny
business.”

“Not very trusting are we?” Loki asks with a smirk.

“I have given my word as guarantee,” Thor says, stepping in. “Loki fights alongside us now.
There is no need for your weapons.”

Steve’s forged steel glare, though, stays right on Loki despite Thor’s assurance. “I mean it. You’re
authorized to test the portal and that’s it. You do anything that even hints at an attack? They’re
going to shoot.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “No need to worry, Captain Rogers. I expected nothing less.”

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For the end of July, it’s cold as a penguin’s ass on the carrier deck. Cold, windy, the deepening
sky looks like it might dump a river’s worth of rain at any minute, and waves the size of suburban
houses keep slamming against the hull, spraying salt water everywhere.

“How about we put this thing up in the air,” Tony says to Agent Hill, standing on his left-hand
side. “Above the clouds, out of the impending storm.”

“Do you know how much it costs to keep this thing flying?” Hill answers back without even
looking at him.

“No, but give me a notepad and a couple minutes and I could probably come up with a good
estimate.”

She has no reply for that. Not even a raised eyebrow. No, she just looks stoically ahead, over to
the end of the runway where Bruce is leveling and adjusting the portal device, aided by two
S.H.I.E.L.D. tech helper monkeys, while Fury hovers bat-like around them in his usual black
leather ensemble and eyepatch. (Wait, is he evil?)

“Where’s Dr. Selvig?” Tony asks. “You’d think he’d want to be here for the big reveal.”

Again, not even so much as a look from Hill. “We have him in a secure location. Understandably,
he expressed a desire to leave last night once he learned Loki would be here today.”

“Right. I get that. Kind of how I feel whenever I see the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo approaching.”

And that comment brings out a disgusted grunt from Agent Hill’s throat. So she’s not a robot, after
all. Whether that’s good news or not... Tough call. Tony’s always been partial to robots.

Looking around the runway, it appears that the gang’s all here to witness the spectacle. Loki,
Banner, Fury, and Thor are positioned down at the end, swarmed by what has to be at least half the
staff of the helicarrier scrounged up for security detail. A little up the line and across the deck,
Romanoff stands with a guy who can only be Agent Barton. Every so often she sends questioning
gazes over Tony’s way, which Tony, hiding behind sunglasses despite the dark sky, pretends not to notice. But Barton’s eyes stay glued on Loki. Coulson and his sidekick pace out a triangle from Fury to Romanoff to Hill, relaying information and trading cryptic agent-speak over headsets like ‘initiate white protocol section fourteen’ or ‘standby level six for alpha-alpha-nine positions’.

And then there’s Steve, who opted to stand at the back of the bus at a safe distance from all the shenanigans.

“What are you doing back here?” Steve asks as Tony saunters over to join him. “No scientific interest in what’s about to happen?”

“What are you doing back here?” Tony flips around on him.

“I’ve seen the Cube in action before, Stark. I’m happier keeping my distance this time.”

“And that would be my reason as well,” says Tony. “Except for the seeing it in action part. I’m just relying on the judgment of the guy who knows what’s about to happen.”

*Good call,* says Steve’s silent nod.

“Besides, I’m way too valuable to be accidentally exploded by space magic. I’ll go in once the guinea pigs have tested it out.”

Shouts from Agent Hill hook his attention back over to the end of the runway. Selvig’s machine is powered up to the level it was back in the lab, with its Gatling gun snout pointed off into the cloudy horizon. Fury hands the scepter over to Loki with a frown so deep his face looks like it’s in danger of turning into a permanent tiki mask. All around, gun barrels glint in the weak, gray light as Hill barks out her orders.

“Kalsi! Henderson! Godet! Once that portal opens, your teams hold focus! Anything comes through I want you to blast it down before it touches the deck! Everyone else has arms on Loki and eyes on me! We’re on high alert here! I give the signal? You shoot!”

The words are out of Tony’s mouth before he can stop them: “Loki won’t try anything. He’s not that stupid.” Fuck, his voice sounds tense. Tight and too high-pitched, and louder than he meant, like it’s fighting to be heard over the sudden taiko beat pounding in his heart.

“There has to be at least fifty HYDRA guns on him on top of the regular firepower,” Steve replies, “and Thor’s right there with the hammer. It’d be suicide to step even an inch out of line. What can he do?”

“Nothing,” says Tony. And repeats, “Nothing, nothing, nothing,” because maybe saying the word out loud enough times will make it true. “He’s really not that stupid. But on second thought? I think I do want to be up there.”

Closer. Yeah, he needs to be closer. He breaks into a jog when the scepter flares blue in Loki’s hand and the Tesseract in turn begins to glow with mirrored light. What can he do from closer? Watch? (Watch as Hill’s stormtroopers shoot Loki down with – no, that’s not going to happen, Loki’s not that stupid.) It doesn’t matter; he just needs to be closer. Beside Fury, right here. It’s as far as he can go before Bruce grabs his sleeve with a shake of the head and a shout to stand back, though the warning’s drowned out by a sound like a jet engine firing up. Tony lifts a hand to shield his eyes against the glare of the Tesseract as it explodes with life and light so bright it’s almost blinding.

What happens next? Well, whoever it is behind him that yells “Holy fuck!” sums things up pretty
well.

A cloud, is Tony’s first thought. But a hollow cloud. A hollow cloud of electric white and blue, and at its center, a hazy tunnel that seems to stretch on for miles. The tunnel’s edge glitters with stars and the rainbow nebulae of a distant solar system. A crystalline road spans out into the darkness, drawing the eye along its path.

Then a city of gold, spires reaching almost to the skirt of space itself, impossible towers shining by the immortal fire of the gods...

At Tony’s side, a stunned-looking Bruce reaches shakily into his pocket, pulls out his Blackberry, and snaps a picture.

“Asgard!” Thor shouts in triumph.

But the triumph is short-lived. Only seconds after the cloud’s hollow center solidifies into a distinct image, the Tesseract begins to shudder and dim. First the cloud evaporates, then the beamline, and then the machine shuts down entirely, blue light dissipating into the darkness of the sky. The connection between the Tesseract and the scepter is broken, and Loki...

The scepter isn’t even in his hand any more. It must have fallen to the deck while Tony watched the portal, and Loki looks like he’s about three seconds away from joining it. With a colorless face and posture like a half-strung marionette, Loki takes a staggering step back. His knee bends.

Tony’s too far and not quick enough to even try to catch him. But Thor is close and inhumanly fast.

“Loki!”

The two sink down to the pavement, Loki’s limp body gently cradled in Thor’s arms. But he’s moving. Loki’s moving, still conscious, still in control of himself, trying to sit up. He’s too weak to do anything more than lift his head and curl his shoulders in, but trying is a good sign.

“Loki,” Thor says again. “Are you...?”

“I’m fine.” The words are faint, but they’re firm.

A grin as bright as a solar flare lights up Thor’s face. Carefully, he maneuvers Loki into something like a sitting position, one hand on the small of Loki’s back, the other splayed out and grasping his neck. “You did it, brother! A success! Home! You found the way home!”

“Of course I did,” Loki mutters through ghostly lips before his eyes drop closed. “I’m the most powerful sorcerer in Asgard, am I not?”

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Amid the frantic anthill of confusion and disbelief on the carrier deck after Thor carries Loki inside, nobody notices Tony leave. Somewhere to his left, Fury is hollering out orders to secure the portal device and make sure power is cut, while up ahead and to the left Coulson negotiates with Banner that he can keep his phone photo as long as it doesn’t end up on Twitter. (“I don’t have Twitter,” Banner insists. “Or even Facebook!”) Tony passes through the crowd invisible. Nobody’s paying attention to him. Why would they be? Everyone on this ship just saw a hole open up in the sky, revealing the depths of space and a world beyond. After that, the actions of one guy seem pretty insignificant.
So Tony follows Thor at a distance, watching as he takes Loki into an empty staff cabin and waiting until he comes out again almost twenty minutes later. Some brotherly cuddling? Knowing them, probably. Tony waits another ten minutes to make sure Thor’s really gone before slipping through the cabin door and locking it behind him.

The room Thor chose has all the charm and elegance of a Lutheran college dorm. Loki’s resting on a narrow and utilitarian bed, carefully arranged in something close to a fetal position, all tucked in snug under an ugly, sock-gray blanket stamped with the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo. Everything about him looks worse than ever. Too frail and weak and anemic with clammy shadows under his eyes and in his lips. His face against the pillow is literally at least as white as, if not whiter than, a sheet. These sheets, like the blanket, have a dull gray cast. He let the magic go too far.

There’s a chair in the corner of the room (plastic, brown, cafeteria-style), which Tony drags over to the bedside. “Hey,” he murmurs, lifting a stray curl of sweat-damp hair back from Loki’s forehead.

“Tony Stark,” Loki whispers in reply, opening his eyes.

“Jesus. What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I opened the way back to Asgard.” And that’s punctuated with a classic, unspoken, you idiot. Even with such a faint voice, it’s amazing how well he still manages to sound like a condescending asshole.

“You know we could have taken Selvig’s machine back to Stark Tower and powered it through the arc reactor. You didn’t have to nearly kill yourself trying to keep the portal open for so long.”

“And miss out on your magic sex?” Loki asks with a shadow of a smile. “How soon you seem to have forgotten last night’s request that I try to use an excessive amount of magic today. Of course we could have powered the device in other ways, but things are so much more fun like this, aren’t they?”

Stunned, Tony can only stare at him. “This was... You did this on purpose?”

“Everything I do has a purpose, Tony Stark. It’s all part of the plan.”

“What plan?”

Loki doesn’t answer. He only smiles a little wider and holds out his unsteady hand.

Do not touch Loki under any circumstances ever, the rule went at one point. It served its purpose then. But things can change. Facts can turn around into polar opposites, given the right incentive.

Tony reaches out to lace his fingers through Loki’s. He likened the magic to a lightning strike once, back in the beginning. Like a shock. An electric surge through his body, shutting everything down and replacing all thought and reason with singular, primal need. And in a lot of ways, it’s still like that. It still crashes into his bloodstream and saturates his bones with an addictive demand for more. It still saps his willpower and the majority of his strength. The difference this time, though, is that now he wants the magic as much as the magic seems to want him. And that feeling, that welcome sweetness pulsing into him and throbbing straight down between his legs, is better than any high.

His hand squeezes, and Loki squeezes back. The other finds its way to Loki’s waist as Tony leans out of his chair to kneel on the floor beside the bed. One touch isn’t enough. He needs two hands here to reel in that rush of power. He slides his fingers under Loki’s sweater vest – actually, on
second thought, that stupid sweater vest has to go, up over Loki’s head – and pulls at the buttons on Loki’s shirt.

The healing effect of even the smallest split-second of contact is immediately evident in Loki. (Just like magic, really.) Wherever Tony touches, color blooms in his skin. A pink flush, strong and warm with desire, begins under Tony’s hands and flows out through Loki’s veins. Up through his arms. To his neck. To his cheeks, burning away the deathly pallor. Draining away Tony’s energy, replacing it with...

*(Oh, that feeling, that feeling, that effervescent feeling...)*

“Come here, Tony Stark.”

There’s no more airy frailty in Loki’s voice. Nor in his body as he sits upright in bed, holding out both arms to wrap around Tony’s shoulders. No, no more frailty or chalky weakness when Tony falls impatiently against him. Just driving *need*. His hands rake down Tony’s back to the hem of his shirt, pulling it up and off while Tony scrambles at the waistband of Loki’s pants, popping the button and pulling down the fly by touch alone. Clothes fade away so easily. Loki lifts his hips at Tony’s urging, Tony shuffles forward out of the fabric pooling around his knees, and suddenly they’re down on the mattress with skin against naked skin, hot and smooth.

It’s almost enough just to touch. Almost enough, as he slides between Loki’s eagerly parted thighs, for Tony to be perfectly content with just what his hands can do. Dragging his nails down Loki’s sides, feeling the ridges of his ribcage and the angular bones of his hips. Pushing Loki’s knees farther apart and feeling the satin-soft skin down the inside and backs of his legs. Palms cupping the firm curve of his ass... It’s almost enough. Every touch comes back to Tony in an echo, like a ghost inside his skin, caressing and stroking and embracing him in a way that nothing else can. Magic in his blood. Magic in every nerve. Loki radiating through everything, inside and out.

It’s almost enough, but it’s not enough, and it’ll never be enough, because all of this will never truly be his, because...

“Don’t go,” he growls with his teeth on Loki’s neck.

The hitch of breath snaps through Loki’s whole body. “Don’t...?”

“Don’t go. Don’t go back to Asgard. Fuck Asgard. Send Thor on his own with the Tesseract, but stay here. I need you to. Stay here.”

“You need-”

He bites down hard on Loki’s throat, drawing out a gasp as Loki’s legs wrap tighter around his waist. “Stay here.”

*Just stay here.*

*With me.*

*Until we both drive each other insane and probably ruin our lives, because this is a terrible idea.*

*But until then? Stay here.*

Loki whispers a reply on the trailing end of a kiss. “I never planned to leave.”
Chapter Summary

On the brink of Thor's departure back to Asgard with the Tesseract, Tony and Bruce discover a flaw in the plan, Natasha learns more than she ever wanted to know about Loki and Tony's relationship, and Tony's magic is booted into high gear thanks to a gift from Loki. And then the fun *really* starts.

Chapter Notes

Well this didn't go as planned. >:(

In related news, I may end up with 25 chapters. We'll see next week.

Also: I am so sorry.

On Sunday morning, for the first time in recent memory, Tony Stark wakes up feeling almost perfectly content. ‘Almost’ because he’s still in a cabin in the helicarrier instead of at home, and ‘almost’ because his back aches from sleeping awkwardly on the S.H.I.E.L.D. equivalent to a cheap motel rollaway, but those are minor inconveniences, not even worth worrying about. Because Loki’s there beside him. And Loki will be *staying* there beside him.

(Of course, to be really technical about it, Loki’s currently halfway beside, halfway under him. Due to reasons pertaining to cramped rollaway. But Tony’s okay with that. Under him is also a perfectly acceptable place for Loki to be, both now and in the future. An ideal place, even.)

“Morning,” he murmurs against Loki’s shoulder, breathing in the scent of warmth and sweat and that secretive tang of sex still clinging to Loki’s skin. A perfect scent; no ‘almost’ here. Something he’s already looking forward to waking up next to tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after that. “You awake?”

Loki’s awake. He rolls over with a gentle mm sound, wrapping his arm around Tony’s waist to pull the two of them closer. Body to body. Face to face. His lips easily find Tony’s for one of those soft, lazy kisses that only ever happen in moments like this. Perfectly content moments. Shimmering afterglow moments before they have to pry themselves apart and remember there’s another world out there, laden with duties and responsibilities and a thousand things to do.

“Sleep well?” Tony asks.

“No. You?”

“Shitty.” But it doesn’t matter, and he smiles, parting his lips to let Loki’s tongue find his own. They’ll sleep better tonight. Maybe. At the very least, they’ll have a more comfortable bed. But no guarantees for any kind of sleep. “You ready to not go back to Asgard?”
Loki squeezes his eyes shut – they were never open in the first place, but he squeezes them shut, creased tight against the light – and lowers his head so his chin rests on Tony’s shoulder. “Nearly. I have a few last arrangements to make.”

“What could you possibly have to arrange before not going somewhere?” Tony teases.

“Thor.”

Oh. Right.

“I’ll need to tell Thor of this change to his plans. He won’t be happy.”

“You want to break it to him before breakfast?”

Loki’s nose brushes Tony’s neck when he shakes his head. “No. Later this afternoon. I’d rather not allow him too much time to work up a temper over it.”

“Stun him into silence, huh?” Tony asks. Which doesn’t strike him as the best way to go, but it’s Loki’s problem, and Loki’s brother. Loki’s a big boy who can make bad decisions on how to deal with this all on his own. He has time. Unfortunately, maybe more time than originally anticipated, since Tony had one of those inconvenient lightbulb-over-the-head thoughts in the middle of the night that he’ll need to discuss with Bruce before the portal’s ready to go.

But that’s for later. For now, his hand slides up the back of Loki’s neck, and then his fingers continue on through tangles of hair, gently twisting it in his grip. “Maybe,” he begins, “after Thor’s gone, I should steal the company jet back from Pepper and fly us to California. Get away from all this for a while.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to do that just yet.”

“Why not?”

“Do you think S.H.I.E.L.D. will let us?”

“Do I think it’s any of their fucking business, and do I care if they’ll ‘let’ us?”

“They will make it their business.” Looking up, Loki presses his lips to Tony’s jaw, and speaks against the scratch of stubble. “Be prepared for the worst, Tony Stark. There will be much to do and many scores to settle before we win our freedom from Director Fury and his mindless minions.”

That’s supposed to be an ominous warning, Tony’s pretty sure, and the kind of thing he should pay attention to, but Loki’s mouth so close to his, and Loki’s hand skimming down his side and slipping between his legs, have this way of turning his brain into a sieve and coaxing all thought to trickle away. “Okay,” he manages to say. “Duly noted. First vanquish S.H.I.E.L.D.. But then week-long vacation of nothing but sex in Malibu?”

“If you wish,” says Loki.

Sometimes even little words, phrased inconsequentially, can expand to fill an entire unspoken paragraph. Tony grins, wraps his arms tight around Loki’s back, and pulls him into the kind of embrace he never wants to leave.

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It’s going to be an almost perfect day. ‘Almost’, again, because of a few minor little snags like he and Loki having to get out of bed, and also having to walk into the Avengers breakfast meeting together wearing yesterday’s wrinkled clothes to face down five judgmental glares (Thor, Natasha, Fury, Coulson, and of course Barton), one embarrassed half-smile (Bruce), and one pleasantly oblivious ‘good morning’ nod (Steve). Tony ignores the glares. They’re the ones who dragged him into this mess; they can put up or shut up when it comes to his deviant behavior. In a couple hours, none of it’s going to matter anyway. Thor’s taking the Tesseract back to Asgard. Problem solved and case closed. In a couple hours, he and Loki can extract themselves from this shit show and hopefully never have to deal with S.H.I.E.L.D. again. It’ll be over. Really, truly, over.

Yep. Perfect day.

He takes a seat next to Bruce at the conference table, trying not to grin like too much of a dork, and grabs a lemon strudel from the pastry tray before Thor can eat them all.

“Now that everybody’s here,” Fury begins in that usual tone of his that makes him sound like he was born impatient, “we called this meeting because Dr. Banner has a few things he needs to go over with the group before we can activate the Tesseract portal again.”

“And send the Tesseract back to Asgard with Thor,” Steve immediately adds. Almost as if he’s had this conversation with Fury many, many times before.

“That’s still under discussion,” says Fury. “For now, Dr. Banner?”

“What’s the deal today?” Tony quietly asks as Bruce stands. “Might this be about the same logistical problem I thought of in the middle of the night?”

“Maybe,” Bruce whispers back. “What logistical problem did you think of?”

“Beamline.”

Bruce nods. “Yeah. Same problem.” He makes his way up to the display board at the front of the room, on which Coulson’s pulled up a layered schematic diagram of Selvig’s portal device. Everything rotates slowly as Bruce punches in a few commands, then the view zooms in on the storage ring and focus magnets, expanding a handful of components to fill the whole board.

“So, um,” Bruce begins, nervously pushing his hair back from his forehead and adjusting his glasses. “As you can see, this is the... uh... this is how the device is currently designed. The energy from the Tesseract originates over here, and comes through this series of magnetic conductors.” Drawing with his finger, a blue line appears down the center of the beam path. “But the device focuses the beam so that the portal is initiated...” He zooms out, showing the device image to the far left side of the board while tapping his finger in a blue dot on the far right side. “...over here. Always at a fixed length. You can set that length, but it’s never going to be less than three and a half meters. That’s how this is designed. Anybody see the problem here?”

Yeah. Tony does. And like he suspected, it’s the exact problem that popped into his head last night while he was doing some very important scientific thought exploration on exactly what he might like to do to Loki once Thor’s safely back in Asgard. Everyone else, though, looks kind of lost, with the exception of Loki, who wears just the tiniest little smile, and, oddly enough... Steve. Of everybody in the room, Steve Rogers is the one who speaks up. And no matter how many times Tony tries to tell himself that Steve was allegedly the dictionary definition of a nerd before he turned into Arnold Schwarzenegger, it still seems unnatural to have him talk about anything more than dumbbells and shooting things up.
“If the portal is always three and a half meters from the device,” says Steve, “the Tesseract is going to be the one thing we can never send through.”

Bruce draws a star on the board and writes ‘Steve’ underneath. “Exactly. Selvig’s original design was meant to create a portal at a distance to facilitate an alien invasion. For that purpose, it’s perfect. For the purpose of taking the Tesseract with you when you go through the portal? Not so good.”

“Can that be done?” asks Thor.

“It can,” says Bruce, sounding less confident than Tony would’ve liked to hear. “We just need to figure out and tweak the design on a few things.”

“Which shouldn’t be too hard,” Tony cuts in. “I mean,” he explains as all eyes in the room turn in his direction, “the majority of the work is already there. The device is built, the battlestation is operational, so all we need to do is reconfigure the shape of the focus chamber to create a localized radiation field instead of a fixed-length beam. Here, let me show you. If you don’t mind?” he asks Bruce as he stands.

Bruce, looking nothing less than relieved at no longer being the center of attention, steps back with a grateful nod and a gesture for Tony to go ahead.

The diagram on the board breaks down into component layers under Tony’s touch: he pushes aside the outer shell, ditches that power source, and gets rid of everything except the casing for the Tesseract and the upper beamline portion. “This is the heart of the device. Everything I moved out can stay. The Tesseract housing chamber, here, can stay. The storage ring, here, which holds extracted energy and regulates output, can stay. The only part we need to change is the beamline cylinder. Here.” One tap turns the cylinder red, and he flicks it away. “If we replace it with something that directs radiation omnidirectionally outward instead of shaping it into a beam, we end up with a portal that surrounds the Tesseract, taking it through.”

“But if it just directs radiation outward,” says Bruce, “we have no way to control the size of the portal cloud without a lot of extra calibrating mechanisms. The only way I can think to do that is with thousands of tiny, focused beams instead of a single big one.”

Tony nods. “True. Unless we find a cheaper quick fix for this bad boy. So let me ask everyone, who’s the laziest person here? Raise a hand. Anybody?” A quick glance around answers that question. “Nobody? Okay, that probably means I’m the laziest guy here. And in my experience, that old proverb about giving the hardest job to the laziest man because he’ll find the fastest way to do it is true. So I say if we want to contain a cloud of energy and redirect it back to the source, the fastest, easiest way is to build a Faraday cage around it.”

As Tony watches, Bruce’s face changes from uncertain frown to spark of hope to agreeable smile of understanding. “That... that could possibly work.”

“Of course it’ll work. It’s my idea. We build a container around the device, somebody goes in there, fires it up, and the whole thing is off to worlds unknown.”

Bruce perks up even further. “Like a TARDIS.”

“Like a TARDIS,” Tony agrees. “A really half-assed TARDIS.”

“How soon before this new device will be complete?” asks Thor. “Loki and I wish to depart with the Tesseract as soon as possible.”
Fury, shaking his head under the weight of that perpetual frown, steps forward. “Now everybody hang on a minute. We still haven’t finalized the decision of whether or not the Tesseract is going with Thor.”

“I thought that was the purpose of yesterday’s demonstration,” says Steve. “To prove the thing is too dangerous to stay on Earth if it can be controlled so easily by people like Loki.”

“We still haven’t finalized the decision,” Fury repeats, enunciating each word sharply.

“With all due respect, sir,” Coulson starts, “we all saw what happened yesterday. And what we talked about with Dr. Selvig on Friday night…”

“The Tesseract is a relic of Asgard,” Thor insists. “It belongs to my father. There is nothing to discuss. Loki and I will take it with us when we leave, and return it to its place in Asgard’s vaults, safe and secure. Only the power of my people is sufficient to guard it.”

“Agreed,” says Steve.

“One more show of hands?” asks Tony. “Everyone in favor of sending the Tesseract with Thor?”

Fury’s impatient declaration that important policies won’t be decided like a grade-school popularity contest is drowned out by a low chorus of agreement as, one by one, everybody in the conference room raises a hand. Steve, Bruce, and Thor first, followed by Loki (barely, in bored way, as if the gesture is beneath him), Barton, Natasha, and finally an apologetically grimacing Coulson.

“Then everything is settled!” says Thor.

“Nothing is ‘settled’ until-“ Fury barks, but he’s interrupted by one of Natasha’s no-nonsense head shakes.

“I think it’s settled.” She nods over at Thor, who’s up out of his chair and trying to coax Loki into an unwanted congratulatory hug. “You want to fight over this with the God of Loud Noises?”

“When will the portal be ready?” Thor shouts from across the room.

“I have equipment back at the tower that can rig up a cage by this afternoon if you want to help me rework the energy output,” Tony says to Bruce. “How long do you think that will take? Bearing in mind that ‘a couple hours’ is the correct answer.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce replies. The smile he’d been wearing up to that moment drops like a stone. “I’ll have you look at it and help me come up with the new design, but right off the bat I’m thinking we’ll need more supplies. More iridium for sure. The core we have is sufficient to stabilize a single beam, but this refraction field you’re talking about will need… I can’t even say. We’ll need to run through the calcs. Maybe as much as another six hundred grams and that’s not going to be easy to track down. Or cheap.”

“Money isn’t an issue here.”

“Tony, I’m not talking about a few thousand bucks worth of stuff we can pick up at Home Depot. I have a couple ideas where to start looking, but the jet fuel alone…”

“And I said money isn’t an issue,” Tony tells him. “Trust me. It’s okay. I want to get this resolved before anything crazy happens or something fucks up or…” Loki changes his mind or Thor changes Loki’s mind. “…somebody does something to wreck my good mood. Whatever you need,
supplies, bribes, hired goons, anything: bill it to Stark Industries and I’ll take care of the cost. We just need to move. You with me?”

Bruce blinks. “Um…”

“Yeah,” says Tony, clapping him on the back. “You’re with me.”

Because it’s a perfect day, and everything has to go according to plan. Almost.

ooo

What Tony thought before about the way the adventure ends wasn’t exactly true. As it turns out, the end of the adventure wasn’t Loki’s uninspired capitulation. The true end involves welding and mechanics and science to the rescue, which is, at least in Tony’s mind, a lot more satisfactory. A daring last-minute dash to finish the device that will send the Tesseract back to its home. One brave man toiling in Stark Tower to complete everything before time runs out. Racing against the clock. Fighting the soul-crushing presence of Natasha Romanoff, left by S.H.I.E.L.D. to babysit him while his intrepid partner, Bruce Banner, undertakes a valiant quest for supplies, armed with nothing but a blank checkbook, Captain America’s nostalgic charm, and Agent Coulson’s powers of negotiation. Okay, and Barton’s Quinjet. Now that’s a real ending, right?

Everything’s in place for the grand finale. The Faraday cage is nearly complete, just getting its finishing touches from the robotic galley slaves downstairs, and Tony’s done as much as he can to build a new focus mechanism according to the updated design. As soon as Bruce returns with the iridium to reshape the core, they’ll be good to go. Selvig’s portal device is on the roof of the tower, wired into the building’s arc reactor, tested for power, and ready for action.

After all this time. After all that trouble. After everything that’s happened, the end is so close it’s almost tangible. Tony throws a glance over toward Loki and Thor, who sit awkwardly close on the couch, joined at the hip. Loki has his arms clamped over his chest, each hand grasping the opposite elbow, and he’s frozen in stillness, not even moving his eyes. Thor keeps fidgeting. Drumming his fingers on his knees. Scuffing his heels against the floor. Chewing on his lip and clearing his throat. Shifting his weight from one side of his ass to the other.

“Relax,” Tony tells him. “Everything’s fine. It’s all on schedule. Bruce texted a couple hours ago saying he found a supplier in Boston, and I haven’t heard anything negative since, so let’s assume that deal’s working out and the Scavenger Hunt Team will be back within another couple hours. Anybody want a drink while we wait? Or I could order pizza.”

“This is no time for food, Tony Stark,” says Thor, sounding a lot touchier than usual. “If the device works now, I see no reason to wait for Dr. Banner’s return. Loki can open the portal-”

“Loki can open the portal eleven feet up in the air with the way things are currently configured,” Tony interrupts. “Now if you want to jump through it and leave the Tesseract behind, that would work, but-”

Thor interrupts him right back. “What of the cage you built? Is its purpose not to direct the energy back to the Tesseract?”

“Yes, but it’s designed to contain a refracted energy output cloud, not a single concentrated beam. The strength of the beamline could potentially rip through the cage upon impact, and would absolutely break through within seconds. Sorry, pal, but we gotta wait for Bruce to replace the focus. Can’t you keep the ants out of your pants for another few hours? And you sure you don’t want pizza?”
“No,” Thor snaps, and it’s probably an answer to both those questions at once. No, he doesn’t want pizza, and no, he sure as hell won’t keep those ants out of his pants. If anything, he’ll invite more to come on in. He jumps up from the couch to make a big fuss of sulking around like a grumpy toddler, first stomping over to the bank of windows, then glaring at the fireplace, and finally pacing behind Loki with an ever-increasing volume of huffing breaths.

The only attention he gets for his antics is from Natasha. And then, it’s nothing special. “Thor, you’ve been waiting over three weeks to take Loki and the Tesseract back to Asgard,” she says without even bothering to look at him. “You can wait a little longer.”

It might be subconscious, the way her fingers toy with the catch that holds one of two HYDRA guns to her belt. It might be, but knowing Natasha, it’s probably not. The bored voice doesn’t mean she’s bored, and that relaxed pose, sprawled out across a lounge chair with her feet up on a throw pillow, doesn’t necessarily mean she’s relaxed. One hand idly taps the gun while the other rests behind her head, but every muscle in her body is coiled and ready to strike.

When Thor doesn’t reply to Natasha’s dismissal, Loki quietly speaks up instead. “Might I make a request?”

Natasha narrows her eyes at him in a way that says You might, but we might not listen, while Tony nods for him to continue.

“While we wait, as there seems to be nothing else to do, I would like to take a moment to speak with Thor alone.”

“Why?” Natasha asks through a frown of suspicion.

“Because he is my beloved brother and we’ve had very little opportunity for wholesome family bonding of late,” Loki snaps. The sarcasm is strong with this one. “It does not concern you, Agent Romanoff. It is relevant only to Asgard. I would discuss with Thor certain factors relating to my return.”

For a moment there, the petulant scowl leaves Thor’s face, replaced by a bud of a smile as he looks down at his little brother. Oh. Oh, oh, oh. Poor Thor. He still thinks Loki’s going home. He still thinks his family is about to be made whole again. That starry spark in his eyes says he thinks the problems are all over, that it’s all about to go back to what he once knew: the happy, Asgardian ideal, with doting parents and loving brothers. The poor bastard.

And Tony should try to feel sorry for him. A little bit sorry. At least a tiny little knot of sorrow, somewhere deep inside, even on a theoretical level. But...

The thrill of desire still singing through his body since the morning’s conversation with Loki is too wild to ignore. Pity for Thor would just ruin a perfect day. He taps Natasha’s shoulder, urging her to stand. “Come on,” he whispers. “I know what this is about. I can tell you.”

“Tony Stark, why don’t you go downstairs and fetch the scepter from the lab,” Loki suggests. “Thor and I will not be long. Perhaps fifteen minutes. And we’ll need the scepter once Dr. Banner returns, so you might as well retrieve it now.”

“Good idea,” says Tony. “You guys talk, we’ll be back soon.”

He tugs at Natasha’s sleeve, leading her over in the direction of the staircase down to the labs, though she’s a reluctant participant in this endeavor. “I’m not sure if leaving him alone is the greatest idea,” she mutters as the door closes behind them and they head down the stairs. Six
flights of stairs over three floors, but at least they’re nice stairs. None of that dark concrete business full of exposed pipes and ductwork in Stark Tower, because Stark Tower is not a communist housing project. Its stairwells run down the sides of the building rather than alongside the central elevator shafts, leaving one wall open to a full bank of windows. It’s bright, spacious, and airy, and nothing smells like pee.

“Loki can’t do anything,” says Tony, just to placate her. “Thor will keep him in line.”

“He can teleport and escape.”

“No, he can’t. He can’t teleport within two hundred feet of the Tesseract, which is currently sitting up on the roof guarded by six S.H.I.E.L.D. agents with those fancy guns of yours. Trust me, he just wants a couple minutes alone with Thor to break the news that...” Oh. Right. How does he explain this to Natasha? “Um.” Does he want to explain this to Natasha?

He turns around in the middle of the stairs to see her staring back at him, one eyebrow curiously raised and a smartass quirk in her lips. “Break the news about what, Stark?”


“Hm,” says Natasha. And they get almost to the landing before she adds, “Are you going to leave me to assume that Loki’s telling Thor about you two sleeping together?”

Really, it’s a good thing Tony’s on the last step, because falling down more than one slate stair could have been disastrous. “No! That’s... that’s definitely not what Loki is telling Thor.”

“Are you sleeping together?”

“No!” Tony pulls out his pass card and swipes it through the security lock on R&D level ten. “That is a ridiculous and unfair accusation.”

Passing through the door, Natasha pauses just long enough to look him square in the eye. “Is this where you crack a joke about how you two can’t possibly have done any sleeping with all the hot sex you’re having?”

Aw, hell. She knows. That wasn’t a guess. She knows. Beyond a doubt, proven fact, knows. “There was a security camera in that dorm cabin last night, wasn’t there?”

“You two really livened things up in the monitoring station,” she says with a smile, pushing past him into the lab. “Usually the highlight of the security reel is watching someone try to pick his nose in secret.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck... No, wait, that’s what got him into trouble in the first place. Shit.

“Natasha, wait, I can explain,” he begins, but a single raised eyebrow stops things right there.

“Stark, there’s no need. You don’t have to explain and you don’t have to make excuses. Your personal choices are yours alone. It doesn’t matter. This is over, Loki’s going back to Asgard, and you’ll move on to something new and, knowing you, worse.”

“But that’s just it. Loki’s not going back to Asgard. That’s the big news he’s breaking to Thor right now. He’s not leaving. He’s staying here. With me.”

It takes less than a second for the condescending smile to melt from Natasha’s face. And only
another second after that for the look of shock that arises in its wake to be replaced by steely hardness that strikes her whole body. “I think that might be a bad idea.”

“You’re right, it is,” Tony agrees. “It’s a terrible idea. I got that. Our entire relationship is a terrible idea, built on meaningless sex, mistrust, a total lack of communication, occasional bouts of violence, and more meaningless sex. But you know what? Despite all that, it still somehow works. Or maybe... because of all that. Natasha, do you have any idea how many relationships I’ve had in my life that lasted more than a week?” He waits just long enough for her to frown before continuing, “Five. Five relationships lasted more than a week. The longest lasted thirteen months, and that was with Pepper. Now how bad is that? I’m forty-two years old, and fucking teenagers have more successful dating records than I do. And you know why?”

“Stark,” she sighs. “You don’t have to justify this to me...”

“No, I don’t, but I want to. I want you to understand something. Pepper was right. She called me impatient and unable to focus and always jumping from one project to the next, and that’s completely true. That’s why nothing works out for me. I get bored. I need a challenge. And with Loki... All the bad ideas are what make things work. I know fuck all about him, what he wants, or what he’s doing. He never tells me anything. I have to work like hell to earn even the tiniest bit of acknowledgement, ninety percent of our day together is him rolling his eyes and telling me what a moron I am, making me panic that he’s about to walk out on me at any second, and you know what? It works. The uncertainty is exhilarating. That’s what I need.”

“And you think that’s a healthy relationship?” Natasha asks.

“No. Of course not. Like I said, it’s terrible, but let me tell you something else. When Pepper and I first started, we tried to do things right. We had six dates - real dates with dinner and movies and picnics and boating and a champagne fight – before we slept together. We tried to do everything the right way, follow all the rules, and it still failed. With Loki? Everything started wrong. In the space of only a few weeks, we’ve both seen each other at our absolute worst. He’s seen me drunk beyond reason and vomiting everywhere, moping over my ex, and acting like a total dick. I’ve seen him violent, hateful, injured, vulnerable... We met in the worst possible place for the worst reasons, and you know what? After that, there’s nowhere to go but up. Every time he does something surprising, after all the shit I’ve seen from him, it’s a good surprise. Like, ‘Oh, Loki did something not totally horrible! Isn’t that cute? I want to lick him all over.’”

Natasha makes a face. “You can spare me the details.”

Okay, yeah, that was probably a little over the line. “Sorry. I’m just trying to say that Loki and I know next to nothing about each other except for those lowest moments, and yet we didn’t turn away in disgust or fear. We’re still drawn to each other. Somehow, this shitty, dysfunctional relationship we’ve cobbled together works. And... I want to at least try. Maybe it’ll blow up in my face, but I have to at least try, right?”

No answer from Natasha. Not surprising, since her answer choices are limited to ‘Yes, you should try,’ which she won’t say, and ‘No, you should give up now,’ which Tony refuses to hear. She rubs her hand over one eye, and leans back against the nearest table. “Well I hope you know what you’re getting into.”

“I don’t,” says Tony. And that’s what makes it so exciting. That’s what makes his blood run hot and his breath catch in his throat. The lack of knowledge, that absence of a safety net. Knowing something could be disastrous and doing it anyway. Isn’t there some saying about how no great reward comes without great risk? Well this is the kind of risk that pays off with the greatest of rewards.
“Then I hope you at least think about what you’re getting into,” Natasha sighs. “And don’t jump into anything that can’t be undone. But for now let’s just get the scepter and go back upstairs. Loki and Thor being on their own makes me worry too much.”

The scepter is right where Loki left it, safe in a locked case at Station Two. Its blue gem glitters bright with internal fire, reflecting thousands of pinpoint galaxies along the edge of a viciously sharp blade.

“Did Loki tell you what it does?” asks Natasha.

“A little,” says Tony. “Yesterday before the demonstration. He said that while the Tesseract is an amplifier, expanding the abilities of those who control it, the scepter is more like an accelerant, cultivating those abilities within you. The Tesseract only intensifies what you already know: the scepter brings out powers you never knew you had. Mental steroids.”

The funny thing is, when Tony says those words, he doesn’t really take much time to consider that they might apply to him, too.

And then...

There are five major human senses. Sight. Sound. Taste. Smell. Touch. And then that elusive sixth sense, that ill-defined concept of something supernatural, never rationally explained or pinned down. It might be psychic empathy, or it might be visions of the future, or it might be otherworldly communication. Just a catch-all bucket for anything outside the realm of normal human abilities, usually relegated to predictable movies about creepy children or hot women with sexy ghost problems.

The moment Tony picks up the scepter, he knows. And that’s it, that’s the sixth sense, right there: knowing. He knows, for example, that Natasha is standing two feet behind him. Not because he saw her before he turned to unlock the case, but because he can feel her there. The energy flows out of her body, as easy to sense now as seeing light or feeling heat. She’s two feet behind him, silently raising her hands to adjust her belt. One floor down, somebody – on Sunday afternoon it has to be a janitor – moves in slow, deliberate steps, swaying his weight as he mops the floor. Three floors up...

He knows. He knows. So many things, and he just knows, as easy as breathing. Breathe in, and the thoughts flow free like air. Breathe out, and they settle into patterns in his mind, suddenly clear after so many weeks of clutter. He knows.

“Tony?” Natasha asks. She’s worried. Her voice sounds calm and uninflected, but Tony can tell; her energy buzzes with anxiety. He feels her touch on his shoulder before it lands. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m... I’m good. Fine.” The scepter is so warm in his hands, inviting all these thoughts to settle into one comfortable little niche in his brain. He can feel them there now. See and hear them, their abstract shapes and colors and sounds unfolding and multiplying into new planes of knowledge. Sentient particles shifting in and out of the borders of space and time.

“As soon as you touched that thing...”

“Really, I’m fine,” he says. “I just... I had a sudden thought. A lot of sudden thoughts.”

“About?”

Too many things, all crashing down at once, landing in the pattern of a cracked and ugly mosaic
that tells a story he doesn’t want to see.

“You know at the end of that movie The Usual Suspects?” he starts slowly. “When Chazz Palminteri’s alone in his office and suddenly everything starts falling into place? Kobayashi and ‘orca fat’ and everything else? And then Kevin Spacey says that line about how the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist?”

“I...”

He spins around. “Listen. I sure as fuck hope I’m wrong but...” The scepter pulses in his hands. He’s not wrong. He knows he’s not wrong. The weight of sinking sickness in his gut tells him, strengthened and made even heavier by the power of the scepter. Flesh transmuted into solid iron. “How did Loki try to take the Tesseract the first time?”

“By force. And surprise.”

“Yeah. And what’s the only way he could possibly take it a second time, now that everyone knows he’s after it, when he has no allies, no resources, and nothing else to help him?”

She blinks, and silently opens her mouth. She doesn’t understand. Fuck, she doesn’t understand!

“Tony, what are you talking about? The Cube is safe. It’s guarded by six agents, Loki is with Thor.”

“And he’s tricked us all into underestimating him! Natasha, he’s convinced us all he doesn’t exist! He’s the Snake! *Loki the Snake!*”

(Everything I say is always relevant, Tony Stark. Why would I say it if it weren’t?)

“It was his plan all along! He can’t take the Tesseract by force now, and even if he could, who could he find to build a machine to open the portal? He needed help! He needed *us!* He needed us to trust him enough to let him near it, or if not trust him, at least believe he’s not a threat! Why else would he spend so much time yesterday looking like an idiot trying to figure out Selvig’s device if not to convince us all he had no idea how to use it? Why would he keep the portal to Asgard open for so long unless he *wanted* to look weak? What better way to show S.H.I.E.L.D. how harmless he is than collapsing on the carrier deck in front of everybody after his own powers got the better of him?”

All color quickly drains from Natasha’s face, leaving her skin a sickly white. She gets it now. “He was setting up for the right opportunity.”

“And now he has it,” says Tony. “Minimal supervision, everything ready to go, Banner and Rogers out of the way. The perfect chance.”

“But if he can’t start up the beam on his own...”

“He can. He knows how. All he needs to do is look inside the machine and he’ll know which buttons to press to turn it on. The energy will tell him. Just like that door over there is telling me right now its code is 73794. He only needed Banner to show him what to do the first time, but now that he knows...”

*(Do I have anywhere near the number of clues needed to unravel your crazy web of evil plots? Not even close.)*
He spent four days in Phoenix trying to convince Loki to come back to New York to deal with the Tesseract. Four days where Loki was, at the same time, subtly convincing him that all ambition to take the Tesseract had been long abandoned.

Natasha jams her headset on, shouting out desperate commands: “Agent Richardson! Do you copy? Agent Sola! Do you copy? Agent Huang! Agent Schaefer! Can anyone hear me!”

(A snake is small and silent and quick, and you rarely see him until it’s too late.)

It’s too late. All six agents on the roof... “Natasha, call Barton! Wherever he and Banner and the others are with that jet, tell him to turn it around and get back here! Then can meet me on the roof!”

“Tony, wait!” she calls after him as he sprints across the room. “You can’t try to stop him alone, its-”

My fault. It’s my fault. I trusted him. I brought him here. I left him alone. I asked him to stay...

(I never planned to leave.)

“I don’t care! I have to try!”

(Be prepared for the worst, Tony Stark.)

Six flights of stairs, and Tony takes them all, two or three at once, in what has to be record time. “Jarvis!” he shouts as he bursts through the door to penthouse level one. “Deploy Mark Seven! Now!”

“The Mark Seven suit is currently offline,” Jarvis calmly replies.

It takes a second for those words to sink in. “Off... What do you mean, offline?! Bring it back up!”

“The Mark Seven suit is currently offline.”

“Since when, and why?!”

“The Mark Seven suit is currently offline.”

Loki. This has to be Loki. Or a side effect of S.H.I.E.L.D. fucking around with things while he was in Phoenix, but more likely Loki. The scepter tells him it was Loki. But there’s no time to fix anything now, and no way to put on the suit without Jarvis coordinating the mechanics.

“Fuck!”

Backup plan? Thor’s sitting on the couch. Right where Loki was when Tony and Natasha went downstairs. He’s sitting, but Tony knows before he even gets up close that Thor isn’t exactly awake. His eyes are open, but pupils are widely dilated and he stares off into space neither blinking nor moving at all when Tony waves a hand in front of his face. Paralysis. Waking coma. Whatever it is, Loki did it. Tony knows.

Behind him, the door to the stairwell crashes open and Natasha flies through, heels hitting the slate floor like gunshots as she runs to join Tony at the couch and falls to her knees. “Barton’s on his way,” she says. “He’s pretty sure he can land the Quinjet on your helipad, but they’re at least ten minutes out.” Her eyes land on Thor’s expressionless face. “What’s wrong with...?”
“Loki,” says Tony. “Not sure what, some kind of magic. Try to wake him up.”

“How?!”

“How should I know?” The scepter isn’t telling him anything. “Punch him in the face. Dump brandy down his throat. Give him a kiss. Use your famous imagination, Anne Shirley! Whatever it takes! I’m going to the roof!”

“Then I’m coming with you!”

She tries to stand up alongside him, but Tony pushes her back down, hand on her shoulder. “No! Natasha, he’ll kill you! If you go up there, he’s already killed six agents, there’s nothing to stop him from adding you to the death toll!”

“And you?”

I’ll be okay. Loki won’t kill him. Tony knows that. (Knows.) “He won’t kill me. Not yet anyway. You stay here, try to wake up Thor. I’ll see what I can do to stall Loki until Barton’s jet arrives.”

Natasha’s hard-eyed glare says she doesn’t like the order, but she understands it. And she’ll follow it. “At least take this,” she says, unclipping one of the white guns from her belt. “You might need it.”

The hard plastic feels strange in Tony’s hand. It hums. Not with sound, and not with any vibration, but with hungry energy that wants to escape. It tickles his skin, and not in a good way. He slides the gun into his pocket. “I hope I won’t need it.”

“But just in case.”

Just in case. Just in case of what? In case Loki turns on him? In case Loki tries to kill him? In case Loki’s too far gone, too far over the edge, and he needs to shoot him? No, he says to himself, and the word pounds in his head as he runs back to the stairwell and up to the roof. No. No. No. No. Won’t do that. No. Won’t need to do that. I can reason with Loki. Talk to him. Stop him.

The rooftop door is already hanging open when he reaches the top of the stairs. Framed in the crack of light, a pair of feet lies on the gravel. Black shoes. Ankles in black socks. The bottom of a pair of black pants. A body lying face down, visible once Tony pushes the door all the way open. It’s surrounded by five more. Six bodies, but no blood. No trauma. Their faces, at least what Tony can see of faces on those not choking on gravel, look peaceful. However they died, it was sudden and painless.

At the far end of the roof stands Loki. He has his back to Tony as he hunches over Selvig’s machine, green cape flying like a flag from his shoulders in the high wind. Sunlight glints off golden armor.

“Loki!”

“Tony Stark.” Loki turns his head first, showing his snake-fang helmet in profile before his shoulders move. “You’ve finally come to join me.”

“You psychotic bastard,” Tony growls. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!”

“Nothing more than what I first set out to do. But you already know that, don’t you?” He looks pointedly down at the scepter in Tony’s hand. “How do you like your gift?”
“My...” Gift. The word strikes like an asp, filling his veins with its slow poison.

“Of course I’m reluctant to see it go, but I think it can do more for you than it can for me now. And you will need it in the days to come.”

“Like fuck I will.” He spits his reply. “I thought you’d given up all this King of the World bullshit. But I guess that change of heart façade was just one among hundreds of lies, huh?”

A flash of anger twists Loki’s face into a shadowed sneer. “I never lied! Not to you, Tony Stark! Everything I said – everything I did – was an act of truth! Any lies you perceive are nothing more than your own wishful thinking!”

“Like going to California?!”

“When this is over,” Loki answers, forcing a blanket of calm over his voice. “When my work is complete. Once I am the true king of Midgard and all have accepted my rule, we can go where you wish. It matters little to me where I place my throne.”

“Jesus Christ, Loki, are you even listening to yourself?” Tony shouts. “King of Midgard? Throne?! You’re crazy! Full out, delusional insane! For fuck’s sake, just... just step back a second. Please, step back. This doesn’t make any sense. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Chapter Summary

An argument, a plea, a villain’s speech, and Chekhov’s gun. And everything falls apart.

Chapter Notes

So... since this chapter ends on a horrible note (and starts on a horrible note, and hits a lot of horrible notes throughout, like one big horrible song), there will be an epilogue to end things properly. Or at least less horribly. Yeah, I’m definitely not leaving it like this, because right now I kind of want to punch myself in the face. Final chapter count has been updated to 25.

Specific warnings in this chapter for discussion of past torture.

There was a poem that Tony studied in school once, in English class, when he was twelve years old: The Story of Isaac, by Leonard Cohen. He forgot most of it immediately, like he did with everything else that class ever threw his way: to his numerical, carefully calibrated, scientific brain, words never incited passion. He struggled with poetry. (How can a person look at lines of text on a page, the story of a boy and his father, and know how to read beyond the literal surface into deeper secrets railing against the Vietnam War and condemning the exploitation of youth under the false guise of righteousness?) But there were lines that stayed with him. Three lines, towards the end, that struck their way past his mental barriers of indifference and lodged themselves within his memory so that years later, he found himself writing them out in blocky script on the inside cover of a chemistry textbook:

When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must
I will help you if I can

In this moment, with Natasha’s gun buzzing heavily in his pocket, his mind is full of those words.

“Okay,” he says, holding up his one free hand in a gesture of supplication. “Okay, I get it, you want to go ahead with this. Or you think you want to. But can we just pause for a sec and talk about what you’re trying to do? If you open that portal...”

“If I open the portal,” Loki calmly replies, “the tens of thousands of Chitauri soldiers waiting on the other side will pour through. They will envelop this city like a swarm of flies, and once they have crushed all who oppose me, they will move on. And on. Until the world falls beneath my power.”

“And you think that’ll work out for you? Loki, I don’t think you understand what you’re about to get into! I don’t know what the population of Asgard is that it can effectively be ruled by a single man, but Earth is a planet of seven billion argumentative, self-centered assholes. I’d be amazed if...
you could successfully unite us all under one cell phone provider, let alone one king!”

Loki sneers. “You doubt my ability to rule?”

“No, but I do doubt your math skills,” answers Tony. “This place is too big and everyone hates each other too much. Tens of thousands of Chitauri might be able to get you New York City if they’re well trained and heavily armed, but they won’t be able to hold on to much else. You’re outnumbered. You can kill a lot of people and cause a lot of damage, but then what? Ground control to Major Tom: unless you have another billion or so expendable aliens hidden up your space hole, you will never control Earth.”

It’s a hopeless conversation. Tony knows that. He can see it in the way Loki stands there smirking at him, as if the God of Assholes knows so much better than some puny human. (Tony only lives on this planet, after all; what would he know about its nature?) Loki doesn’t care about statistics. He doesn’t care about probability. He doesn’t care about the trivial, detailed logistics of what enslaving an entire world would really mean. He’s too caught up in the dream, forsaking reason for the elusive promise of power or glory or... what is he even after? Revenge? Self worth?

“Fine,” Tony says, changing tactics when Loki remains silent. Maybe he can’t talk Loki out of this, not yet, but he can look around and scramble together all the other advantages he might have right now. And granted, all those advantages add up to a grand total of one, but one will be enough. Loki’s paying attention to him. Instead of starting up the machine, Loki’s waiting there, patiently bemused, and humoring this weakling attempt at a convincing argument.

Tony can stall him. Until Barton arrives with that jet, or until Thor snaps out of the enchanted coma. Or until somebody thinks up some way out of this. Anything to keep Loki from opening the portal.

“I guess it’s time for you to give me your big speech, then.”

“What speech?” Loki asks. He takes a step toward Tony, and another, then sideways around the fallen body of a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. A casual little stroll away from the device. (*Good. Good. Keep going.*)

“You know. The big, climactic, bad guy speech. At the end of the movie, the villain has the hero in his fortress of death and launches into the whole ‘as you know, Mr. Bond, my plot to rule the world is nearly complete’ spiel. It’s where you tell me what you’re doing and why, revealing the masterful complexity of your evil genius.”

“And why would I do that, exactly?”

Tony shrugs. (*Stall, stall, stall, keep him walking...*) “Why not? Don’t you like to show off? Or don’t you have some burning desire to tell me why the fuck you’re still doing this when I’m standing here giving you every good reason not to? And I don’t mean just the ‘it’ll never work’ logical reasons. I want to know why you’re so set on destroying this planet when I think it’s the one place you could actually be happy. You hate Asgard and don’t want to go back – I get that – but you can always stay here. With me. We can go back to California, just like I said this morning. Maybe you can start a cult on the internet or something. Do you want to start a cult? I’d be okay helping with that. We can build a website, make it seem exclusive by setting up some arbitrary qualifications for membership, I know a lot of really gullible celebrities... Internet cult messiah with a legion of obedient and reverential followers is a way more attainable goal than emperor of the world. Live out the American Dream. There’s nothing stopping you from being happy here.”
If that had any impact at all, Loki gives no indication. He’s stopped where he stands, five feet away, and it’s the blank look again. Always the blank look, with his marble statue face and eyes that seem to look through Tony’s insubstantial, mortal form. “No,” he murmurs. “I lost any chance at true happiness a long time ago. I could find contentment, perhaps, but...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Why?” Tony asks. “Why just contentment? What’s so terrible that it prevents you from ever being happy and pushes you into all this? I think there has to be some tale of woe in here somewhere. Let’s have it. Come on. Give me the epic speech.”

For a moment, Tony’s convinced Loki won’t reply. Loki’s too quiet and too careful, neatly smoothing down his coat and folding his hands together in that way people do when they’re trying to fill a gap of silence with distracting little actions. And avoid an ugly question, or its ugly answer. But then he raises his eyebrows in thought, paces a few steps to the right, and opens his mouth.

“Power,” he finally says. He speaks the word elegantly, like a silver-screen starlet exhaling a ribbon of cigarette smoke. “It always has a cost. Happiness is first to go, Tony Stark. One can never have true power and be truly happy. The two repel like oil and water. Nor can one keep a sense of self. Identity fails in the absence of happiness, followed closely by self-respect, as you find yourself eagerly acting in ways that would have once made your stomach turn, all to push yourself an inch further and gain just a little more. Soon this behavior destroys friendships. Then family. Power is greedy, and consumes all. It will corrupt conscience, destroying the ability to distinguish between what you once considered right and wrong, and it will take away any shred of empathy or honor you may still hold. Clinging to tattered remnants is difficult when your hands are so full of things much larger and greater than mere emotion. Those slip away. Unnoticed. Ash on the wind. And ultimately? Power will take your sanity. Because once you have lost everything else... what have you left? A few shadows of memory? A nagging doubt that, perhaps, at one time, you were not this grandiose, overinflated mockery of your former self, magnified beyond all reasonable scope? That perhaps once you were small and plain and normal and... happy? Is it even possible to recall such banal times when now the world spins on your fingertips?”

He pauses to stare hard at Tony with his eyes of frigid glass, maybe looking for an answer, maybe looking for an expression of shock to justify his horror story, or maybe just to let himself bask in self-indulgent conceit. “Eventually there is a moment of clarity,” he says, softer now. “One ray of light pierces the fog and you can see all the past and future around you in one vast tableau. All you have lost, all you have gained, all you will one day have, and all you can now never possess. At that point you ask yourself: was it worth it? And I think you know now, Tony Stark, that the answer is always ‘yes’. The power is always worth the price.”

The trouble is, he’s looking back over his shoulder at the Tesseract when he says the last part, and several long seconds heavy with tension drag out before he turns back to Tony.

“Who told you that?” Tony quietly asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Everything you just said. It’s a good epic speech, but too prepared. That’s not the kind of thing people just say. Nobody talks or thinks like that in real life. Not even Ye Olde Asgardians. So who’s your screenwriter?”

“You refuse to accept that I might adhere to such bleak sentiments?” He smiles when he says that, cracking his blank plaster mask. Not a kind smile. Sharp. Cruel.
“It’s not refusal to accept anything,” says Tony. “I know that’s not you talking. You don’t really believe that shit. Maybe you want to, or you want to convince yourself that you do, but deep down? No. You’re just reciting back some other asshole’s opinion by rote like a mindless yes-man. And that’s not you. Since when does Loki the Snake betray himself in favor of being someone else’s slave? Since when does Loki the Snake give a fuck about power?”

The hard smile stays frozen in place. “Everyone desires power, Tony Stark.”

Tony shakes his head. “No. Not you. Remember all those stories you told me? All those relevant things you said? Not a single one ever pointed to you wanting anything more than exactly what everybody else had. Acceptance. Respect. A place in the world. You’re not the iron-fist dictator type. You set up a good show of pretending you are, but you’re not that kind of guy, Loki. I know you. Somebody else put you up to this, and I bet I’d win the big prize if I guessed it was Thanos. Right?”

Oh, he’s right. The slight but sudden stiffness in Loki’s stance says so beyond a doubt, even if Loki himself stays dangerously silent.

“So why?” Tony asks. “Why are you risking your life, and the lives of who knows how many thousands or millions of other people, chasing after an insane dream you don’t even want? For some motherfucker who’s obviously just using you?!”

“You don’t know the first thing about this!” Loki snarls.

“Maybe not, but I can guess, and I think my guesses are right on target. The point is, you don’t have to do this! Thanos is light years away with no means of reaching you, so why are you still following his orders? Just forget about him!”

“It’s not that easy!”

“Loki, what could be easier than not trying to enslave the world?! It’s the easiest think you could do! You literally just have to walk away from this! Just walk away! Come downstairs with me! Right now! Walk away and-”

“I can’t!” Loki shouts. And the cracked blank mask crumbles entirely away, leaving panic and terror behind. “You think you have the answer, but it is not so simple! I can’t walk away! Not from him! Midgard has two fates, and these are your choices! Either Thanos comes to take the Tesseract himself and destroys you all, or I capture it for him and remain behind as your realm’s keeper! Those are the only two outcomes! And that was my bargain with him! I find the Tesseract and take ownership of Midgard in exchange for my freedom! If I stay here as his hand to rule over you, I will be unable to return to him, and I cannot return to him! I won’t go back! Not there! Not to them! Even if I must destroy a thousand worlds, I will never go back! If you knew what they did, Tony Stark... If you knew...” Within the framing lines of his helmet, his face has turned sickly pale, and his eyes shine too bright with fire and salt. His hands shake as he lifts them to touch his neck and push away some old phantom injury. “You would not condemn me if you knew.”

I don’t condemn you now, Tony tries to say, but somehow he can’t. The scepter is too heavy in his hand, drawing in Loki’s frantic energy, and it’s so hard to make so much as a sound through the bitter lump rising in his throat.

He knows what Loki’s going to say. (Knows.)

And Loki does. “They are hands-on monsters. The Chitauri. And curious. They like touching
and testing and pushing limits. How long can a person live without food before he is too weak to fight back? How much blood do the veins hold? How many teeth are there? What hides behind the eyes, or inside the ears, or under muscles? They want to see what happens when they peel your skin back, or melt it away. How easily does flesh shred into a mess of gore if they hold your hands and feet to a serrated wheel? How long can a body be frozen or burned until bones shatter and char? They want to know how many hours or days or... or weeks you can live through the pain, crippled and blind and begging for death in a solitary pit where nobody can hear your pathetic screams... And then? After that? When you are less than a broken ruin, welcoming the end, certain you are about to draw your last breath? Then you wake up from their hallucinatory false reality, and realize that in truth only minutes have passed! And it was all in your mind! AND THEN THEY START AGAIN!”

He screams those words, ragged and shrill, clasping his hands over his neck as his body instinctively shrinks in on itself. Like the memory causes him pain, if the pain was all in his mind, and his mind still remembers...

Sick. Tony feels sick. Loki’s story churns in his stomach, and prickles nauseating heat down his spine. And Loki’s not anywhere near done.

“I was with them for days and it felt like years! Three days, and it would take me hours to list out even half of what they did to me! Only three days, and I came so close to death that my magic left me, and it was only by the grace of fate that my Jotun form lay dormant beneath. The ice in my skin made their shackles too brittle to hold me. I think they were sorry, then, that they did not kill me sooner. Because I certainly did not bother to play with them before ending their wretched lives. And I should have killed them all! All of them! Every last one – the soldiers, the leaders, the brainless drones – I should have killed them like the insects they are! I wish I had. Torn their heads from their bodies and ripped their throats with my teeth. I wish... But I told you Jotnar are stupid. Easily lured in with promises of power and revenge. So you see?” His voice, cracked with rough edges, falls quiet. “Here I am. I made a bargain. And swore an oath. My freedom in exchange for the Tesseract and your world made docile.”

“Loki...”

But what do you say to that? ‘I’m sorry’? So incredibly, indescribably, pitifully sorry? For what was done in the past and can’t be changed? For what Tony never knew had happened, and might never have known? What can a person possibly say? “I...”


Loki glances down at his hands. Flexes his fingers. Tightens his jaw. When he looks back up, he seems to have found his composure again, and the blank mask has been mended. “You were my ray of light, Tony Stark,” he says. If there’s any emotion in his voice at all, it’s nothing more than a sliver of regret. “You shone through all the confusion to show me the truth: that happiness is real, and it is within reach, but it is fleeting and mortal and will never last beyond its own finite limits. Only power can be eternal.”

It takes a moment for Tony to notice exactly what he’s doing when he turns his back and closes the distance between himself and Selvig’s device. It’s a disbelieving moment when Tony can only think, What now? as Loki’s hands reach down to the number pad and lights begin to glow.

Then realization comes slamming into the front of his mind, along with that specific set of actions the hero’s supposed to do in a situation like this. Scream out, “No!” Take a step forward.
Stumble, almost fall, take another step, arm outstretched. As if the terrible thing that just happened can be caught in the palm of a hand, and the world set right again so easily.

“Loki, no! You don’t want to do this!”

“Yes, I do,” Loki answers, the gloss of calm back in place to enfold him completely once more. “I told you. I have no choice. Neither do you. It is either this or the destruction of your world.”

He punches in the first code, which Bruce was so sure would remain securely hidden on an electronic key fob.

“Loki... Loki, please...”

And then the second. No need to wait for any arbitrary timeframe to elapse.

“Don’t make me...”

The gun might as well be a lead weight in his pocket and around his wrist, drawing his hand down.

Third code. The portal device hums to full power, and the Tesseract brightens with promise.

“Are you going to shoot me, Tony Stark?”

Tony’s grip freezes on the handle of the gun.

“I know what you have. I can feel its energy. Your hand is on it right now. Are you going to shoot me?”

“I don’t want to,” Tony whispers, and his voice might be lost on the wind, but he knows Loki can still hear.

Turning, Loki reaches out with an empty and waiting hand. “Then come with me,” he says. His fingers curl inward just a fraction of an inch as an invitation. “As I am Thanos’ lieutenant, you will be mine. Stand beside me that I might be a merciful king to your people. Tell me how best to rule and I will heed your advice. Together we could make Midgard great! A mighty power to challenge even Odin Allfather! Your right hand may have found a gun, Tony Stark, but your left still holds the scepter. My scepter. My gift to you, if you join me. It will be yours.”

The scepter. He looks down at the jewel in its knife-like claws, and feels, for a moment, that it might be looking back at him. Questioning his worth. Asking him: What do you want?

You could do it, the jewel says. Take your place under the crown of the world. Who better, Tony Stark, than the man who so arrogantly claimed to have privatized peace?

Or, it offers, you could end this all now with the gun in your pocket...

But it also says that Natasha is coming. Its power limns her energy against the inanimate darkness of the stairwell. Behind her, Thor. Running. They crash through the door and onto the rooftop just in time for Thor to let out a shout of horror as the Tesseract explodes with life and a beam of pure energy slices the air.

It hits the clouds with an electric whine and a crack like thunder. Only this time the other side isn’t a golden city, but the cold and black depths of space lit only by pinprick stars. Something shadowy swarms just within the mouth of the portal. A writhing cluster of dull blue lights. Hundreds of glowing insect eyes.
And then the first one comes through. And the second. And ten more...

Thor moves first. He jumps into action without waiting for an order, flying up into the sky with his hammer swinging. The first blow he lands on one of those things – those Chitauri – knocks Tony back to reality. The portal is open. The portal is open, to another world, the far end of space, and the invaders are on their way. It’s not just a threat any more. Not just an abstract fear. They’re here and they’re real and they’re...

He spins around to face Natasha, who holds her gun with both hands to steady her aim. “Loki!” she shouts. “Shut the portal down!”

“Or what?” he sneers. “You’ll shoot?”

“You have three seconds to shut it down before I pull the trigger!”

Spreading his arms wide, presenting a target, he just laughs in her face.

One second ticks by. She shoots on two.

The blast of energy erupts from the muzzle of her gun, and deflects harmlessly off the barrier of magic Loki throws out to protect himself. “You’ll need to do much better than that, Agent Romanoff! Have you no better tricks up your sleeve?”

She shoots again, and Loki blocks, this time sending back an attack of his own. The little silver dagger sinks into Natasha’s hand. With a gasp and a bitten-back grunt of pain, she falls to one knee and the gun tumbles out of her broken grip.

“Were you not listening?” Loki laughs. “You’ll need to do much better! Much, much better...” He calls up a second dagger as the first fades into blackened flakes, flicking it into the air and catching the blade between his fingertips.

Natasha’s uninjured hand flies out to her fallen gun, but Loki’s new dagger strikes her in the arm.

“Shall I show you?” asks Loki. “Give you an example of how one might kill an adversary?”

When it all comes down to dust, the poem goes, I will kill you if I must...

The gun in Tony’s pocket wants to be in his hand. He knows. The scepter tells him.

I will help you if I can.

That shot, the third shot, hits Loki. Upper chest. Right side. He doesn’t see that one coming, and has no time to make himself a shield. It hits, and the look on his face switches over in an instant from hateful malice to sudden shock.


Loki falls to his knees.

There’s no blood at first. It’s not like a bullet that sprays a celebratory crimson fountain as it hits its target. The blast of blue energy collides with Loki and sinks in like a ghost, disappearing into his body. Absorbed. It leaves behind a little cloudburst, and...

His armor is gone, where he was hit.
He’s scrambling at air and reaching up to Selvig’s machine with his left arm, trying to pull himself up. His right arm hangs limply down, barely able to move. His hand finds a solid edge, but he can’t hold it. No strength. No balance. He’s on his back in the gravel, gasping to draw breath.

His clothing, under the missing armor, is gone.

His skin, under the missing clothing, is a twisted relief of ridges and divots, white and pink and scorched with blue.

“Stark!”

That’s Natasha shouting. She might have been shouting before, but Tony didn’t notice, just like he didn’t notice how he got to Loki’s side, or how his shirt came off, or when he pressed the wadded-up fabric down over Loki’s disintegrated skin, or when the blood started to flow so fast and warm and thick it’s already covering his hands. He dropped his gun somewhere. And the scepter.

“Stark, move! I have to blast the machine! It’s the only way to stop the portal!”

There’s too much blood, and Loki chokes on it when he tries to speak, spattering his liquid phrase across Tony’s chest.

“Stark! Move!”

“No!” And that’s him shouting back, though where the words are coming from, he doesn’t know. “Don’t shoot! If you damage the focus, all that energy will be released without any control! It’ll kill us all and take part of the city!"

“Then what do we do?!”

“I didn’t mean ...” Tony whispers to Loki, if Loki can even hear, as he tries to reach one hand around the back of Loki’s neck. Lift his head. Drain the blood from his throat and help him breathe. “I didn’t want...”

“We have to close the portal!”

Loki doesn’t try to speak. He draws one labored breath through the blood in his mouth. And spits it back out in Tony’s face.

Overhead, the sky fills with blasting guns and the flash of lightning as the portal swirls wider.

And Loki, his Loki, who kissed him that morning and lay bare and vulnerable in his arms, whose skin reflected the silver light of the arc reactor to cast gentle shadows across their bodies, who closed his eyes when Tony’s mouth traced the line of his cheekbone, exhaling a small and shuddering breath...

Natasha’s red hand is on his shoulder. “Tony... We need to stop this. The portal. If you know anything...”

It’s all come down to dust. “The scepter,” he mumbles, pushing speech past the clenched wire in his jaw. “It’ll tell you...”

Loki laughs without sound, blood streaming in place of a voice.

But it’s still his Loki.

_I will help you if I can..._
At one time, Tony had his arms wrapped around Loki’s body. He felt the thick warmth of blood on his skin, on his hands, on his fingers, on his wrists, seeping through his clothes. He had looked into Loki’s eyes... That’s his last memory. That’s what’ll be burned into his conscious mind for who knows how many years to come.

In the next second, Loki was gone. Because Tony didn’t have the strength to hold on to him. Not against Thor. Thor took hold of Loki under the arms and lifted him up as if he weighed nothing, pulled him away, out of Tony’s reach, and then they both were gone. Just like that. A sudden end.

S.H.I.E.L.D. came up to the roof. Shouting. Chaos. Coulson asked him something. He answered something. That part, he can’t clearly remember. Then Tony went downstairs, sat in a chair facing the windows overlooking the New York City skyline, and stayed there without moving as the sun set and the night came in.

Pepper comes back around midnight. Tony won’t say she comes ‘home’, because it’s not really home any more. Not after everything that’s happened. Now it’s just ‘back’.

“Tony?”

He doesn’t answer, but she finds him anyway, sitting there in the dark.

“Oh my God, Tony, are you okay??”

And that’s all he really hears. She says other things too, about news reports of an explosion on the roof of Stark Tower, and street rumors of an alien invasion. About a police roadblock that kept her away all evening until Coulson saw her arguing with two cops and told her... He’s not listening carefully enough to know exactly what she says, or what Coulson said.

The train of half-panicked speech stops when she switches on a lamp. Then it’s a shocked beat of silence before a whispered, “What happened to you?”

Tony looks down at himself. At the stains of blood that saturate his jeans from waist down to shins. At more dried blood flaking on his bare chest and arms. At the sticky, crumpled, shirt he still has squeezed in his hands.

That’s a good question. What happened to him? “I...” he starts, but Pepper’s anxious statement cuts him off before that one word has a chance to grow into even half an excuse.

“You’re covered in blood!”

“It’s not mine,” he says, because that’s what you say. Though, when you think about it, how is being covered in somebody else’s blood any better than being covered in your own? In fact, wouldn’t that be worse? Your own blood makes you a victim. Somebody else’s makes you the villain.

“Where’s Loki?”

Another good question, and part of the answer is splashed across Tony’s body. “I shot him.” A harsh, blunt explanation for a harsh, blunt action. Why bother trying to soften it? Is that possible?

Uncertain, Pepper stares down at him in silence.
“He held out his hand to me, asked me to go with him, and I shot him. With one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s guns. Right in the...” He can’t say it out loud, so he mimes it instead, poking himself in the chest with a gun-shaped hand. “I think I was the only person in the world who could’ve talked him out of it, but I panicked and...”

“Jesus,” Pepper whispers, her voice barely audible as it slips through the fingers she’s raised to cover her mouth. “Is...”

“He’s alive. He’s... Thor took him to...” Somewhere. “I don’t know where Thor took him.” Didn’t have time to ask. Away Loki went, just like that. Spirited off into the air. “They’ll go back to Asgard.” S.H.I.E.L.D. took the space portal device, and somebody might have dropped in couple hours ago to tell him they called Dr. Selvig back to finish the redesign. Or maybe he imagined that. Everything that’s happened since he came down from the roof isn’t like linear time any more. It’s fragmented and intermingled with scenes of ghosts that maybe only exist in his head, and all the broken pieces are too blurry to sort out and put back together in the right order.

“What do you want to talk about...”

No. Tony shakes his head. He hates talking about these things. Some people want to. He knows that. Some people need to relive their worst moments, over and over, blaming themselves and obsessing their way through the details of what went wrong and how it could have been changed. (If only.) Eventually they talk their way into acceptance. Pepper’s one of those people. She talks things through. But Tony’s not. In this moment, there’s nothing less appealing to him than having to think about what happened and describe what he did. If he never has to think about it again, that’ll suit him just fine.

“What do you need anything?” She’s so eager to help, leaning forward and nodding with those wide, concerned eyes

Nothing that she can get. “No.”

“You sure you don’t want a glass of water, or...?” Always so eager to help.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Pepper, I... I can’t even think right now. I just...”

*I almost killed the person I was trying to save, and now he’s gone.*

“What do you want me to tell you what you need?”

Maybe. Maybe that is what he needs: Pepper to tell him what to do. He won’t have to think about anything, not even whether or not he should get out of this chair, if he has Pepper to do that for him. Slowly, he nods.

She nods in return, the confident gesture of a person accustomed to taking charge. “Then stand up. You’re going to have a shower, because Tony, you can’t sit there with all that...” (For a small mercy, she doesn’t say the word.) “...on you. While you’re in the shower I’m going to make some tea. You’re going to have a cup of tea, then go to bed, and maybe tomorrow we can talk. Okay? We can get through this.”

Yeah. Again, he nods. They can get through it. People get through things all the time. Worse things. Don’t they? People get over trauma and loss. He got over his parents’ deaths. He got over Obadiah Stane’s betrayal. He got over three months as a prisoner in Afghanistan, and he got over almost dying of palladium poisoning. He got over Pepper (mostly). He’ll get over Loki. (Though that name squeezes his chest with a cold, Jotun grip.) He’ll get over everything they did and
everything they shared and everything he thought he felt. (Because he shouldn’t feel those things now.) And everything he maybe, even at the very end, thought Loki might have felt, too. (Because that doesn’t matter any more.)

People get over things. They get over things like this all the time.

They put bloody shirts carefully into bags and roll them up and hide them in drawers, and then they shower, and then they sit in bed and drink tea to prove to the world that everything’s going to be okay. That’s what they do.

And when they wake up the next morning they keep going on with their lives.

Even though he wants Loki. All he wants is Loki. All there will ever be for him is Loki. And Loki is gone.
Are You There, God? It's Me, Tony

Chapter Summary

Epilogue. Three months after the incident with the portal, Loki's motives are questioned, Tony fills his days with science, and Bruce might as well start wearing a shirt that says ‘No, Tony, Tony, No’ in order to save himself time and words.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 31, 2012. Halloween. This used to be the night where Tony Stark would put on some lame pirate costume and go trawling the party scene for an easy hookup. Used to be. And now? Now, he’s sitting in his workshop screwing around with the schematics for his newest toy, adjusting this and recalibrating that, tweaking the design and hoping like hell it works this time.

“Okay, Jarv, let’s have it,” he says, loading the new fixes. “Fire up the sim again. See if we can get this thing to stay in one piece.”

On the tabletop in front of him, the projected image glows as it powers up, pulsing brighter for four promising seconds before it explodes into a million pixels and joins its predecessors in inevitable death.

Tony drops his head into his hands. “Shit.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” says Jarvis. “The initial power surge is still too unstable. With that level of output, the energy is too strong to be contained in the casing.”

“No. It should’ve worked. Run diagnostics on the coding for the simulator: make sure this isn’t just some system glitch creating a false failure.”

“The coding appears to be correct.”

“Then run a detail report and take us back to the last time it worked.”

“The last successful test occurred two days ago at half power.”

Exactly what Tony was afraid of hearing. “Right. Okay. Well, roll it back to the start again. We’re getting nowhere with this version, so why don’t you throw together some mockups, increasing power on the original to see how big we can take it before it fails. Then add the new components back in one by one and do the same thing. See if you can pinpoint where we’re going wrong. In case anything amazing happens, I’ll be upstairs.”

He’ll be upstairs pacing the empty house and trying to think his way through this problem. Just like he did the previous night, and the night before, and almost every night before that for the past month. He’s close. So close, and he knows he’s so close, but that last inch... that last, elusive little secret that’s keeping him from finalizing this design...

He pours himself a glass of milk, squinting against the glaring light of the fridge in the dark kitchen, and paces out to the living room and the bank of windows overlooking the ocean. He
could turn on a lamp, but somehow it’s nicer like this, in the shadow of night. He can stand against a wall of glass, staring up at the wispily clouded stars, and imagine he’s closer to them.

(Which way is Asgard? Can he even see its star system from here? Does it belong to one of those tiny winks of light across the impossible distance of space?)

It’s been three months.

To be exact, it’s been three months and two days since Loki opened the portal. Two months and twenty-seven days since Thor used the Tesseract to take Loki back to Asgard. Two months and twenty-four days since Tony returned to Malibu and Pepper stayed in New York. Two months and nineteen days since he last spoke to anybody involved with S.H.I.E.L.D.. Two months and sixteen days since he last interacted with another living person on a level more meaningful than an exchange of money for food delivery. One month and eight days since he last even spoke to another living person over the phone about anything more than how much today’s pizza is going to cost.

And maybe that’s weird, but in all honesty, Tony’s fine with the way things are now. Involving oneself in the world at large is overrated. Being part of the bigger picture is overrated. It was never more than a show, anyway: the exhausting, unending spectacle called Being Tony Stark. The drama and the glamor and the constant push to be bigger and better and more exciting, all for the benefit of an unforgiving public with a three-second attention span. Why did he ever bother? Why did he ever think he needed to? What was the point of spending all those years building up such a colossal image, as if it added any value to him at all?

So maybe it’s weird, but he’d rather be alone, in the dark, at 11:30 pm on Halloween night, than where he was five years ago, surrounded by booze and drugs and fake tits and an entourage of adoring idiots whose names he didn’t even bother to know. He’s happier with an engineering problem in his head than with a thousand dollar bottle of champagne in his hand. Happier wearing ripped jeans than a Zegna suit. (Though maybe later he’ll put on one of those suits and crack one of those champagne bottles to sit downstairs watching a shitty horror movie while a new project design renders, because, fuck it, why not?) He’s happier overall. Or maybe not exactly ‘happy’. ‘Accepting of his new lifestyle’ might be a better description. Some things could be better, but at least he’s doing well enough now. One thing is still missing.

It’s been three months and two days since he last saw Loki, on the rooftop. That’s three months and two days he’s spent thinking about Loki. A constant drumbeat of one thought after another. One recollection after the next. Good and bad both, but mostly good. The memory of touch and taste and the sound of Loki’s voice with its low, silken-smooth cadence (he can almost feel its echo in his ear)...

He thought it would get easier, but it hasn’t. He thought he’d come to his senses and realize how stupid he was to ever think that being with Loki could be a good idea, but that didn’t happen. So.

Plan A was to do everything he could to forget about Loki. Back in August, at Pepper’s insistence, Rhodes came to stay for a couple days and they did nothing but talk about cars and weapons and play video games, at which time Tony proved that he can still wrap Super Mario Bros. 3 in 28 minutes. That almost worked and everything was okay until Rhodes mentioned an upcoming training camp in Phoenix. And then it all fell apart again. One offhand mention of one city is all it took. Things weren’t as okay as Tony wanted them to be.

Plan B, a few weeks later, was to climb up onto the roof and yell into space and try to contact Asgard. It had worked for Thor in Atlantic City, so why not? Tony stood on the roof, staring up at the stars, and called out to a distant planet of pagan deities in hope of an answer. Any kind of
answer. (Are you there, god? It’s me, Tony...) Nothing came.

Now he’s on to Plan C. The plan that keeps literally exploding in his face.

Maybe it’s not meant to be, and was never meant to be. And maybe it will never be. Maybe he’ll never see Loki again. But as long as some little part of his brain keeps pushing and insisting that he continue to try, he’s not about to give up. (Tony Stark doesn’t give up.)

The phone in his back pocket vibrates and chimes. Text message. He has no interest in either talking or typing to anybody right now, but something still makes him check it.

The name on the screen is a surprise. Bruce Banner.

You awake?

Well. Maybe he has some interest in talking to one person. He doesn’t text back; he calls. Bruce answers on the first ring.

“Hey,” Bruce says, sounding surprised. “Tony.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing much. Just bored out of my mind watching this really bad robot movie from the 50s and somehow it reminded me of you and... That sounds like a really stupid reason for texting you now that I say it out loud. Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” says Tony. “Believe me, I’ve texted people over stupider things.”

Bruce sounds like he’s nodding. “I guess I just haven’t talked to you in a while and thought it might be good to catch up. Actually I haven’t talked to anybody since...”

Since Barton’s jet didn’t make it back to New York. Tony knows the story. Bruce started to lose control on the way back to the tower once he learned what Loki had done, and then... “Yeah, neither have I,” Tony says. Like the ‘since’ they’re discussing is no big deal. “Coulson’s left me a couple messages, but I haven’t replied. He hasn’t bothered to come out here yet and bug me in person, so it can’t be anything too important.”

“You’re back in California?”

“Yeah. It felt like the right thing to do. New York was too...”

“I know what you mean,” Bruce answers softly.

“How about you? Where are you these days?”

“British Columbia. I’m still technically working for S.H.I.E.L.D. right now on a few research projects, but Fury said he didn’t care where I worked as long as I checked in regularly. So I came back here because... I don’t know... it feels a bit like getting away.”

“Nothing wrong with getting away,” says Tony. “Speaking of which. Do you want to come over?”

There’s a long, uncertain pause on Bruce’s end. “What?”

“Do you want to come over?”
“Right, I heard you, but since that came right after you telling me you were in California and me
telling you I’m in B.C., I...”

“I know, logistics,” Tony admits. “But we can work that out. The original question still stands.”

“You mean, right now?” asks Bruce.

“Yeah. Right now. Or maybe more realistically in a couple hours, because I’ll have to send a jet
for you, and-”

“No, Tony, I’m not letting you send a private jet.”

“Where exactly are you? Vancouver?”

“No.”

“Anywhere near Vancouver?”

“No.”

“What’s the IATA code? I’ll send the jet right now.”

“Tony...” he sighs. “It’s almost midnight. I’m in a tiny little town and the tiny little airport’s
probably closed until tomorrow morning. Can’t we just talk on the phone?”

“No. I need you here.” And as soon as he says those words, he knows they’re true. He needs
Bruce. He needs a second set of eyes to look over the Plan C prototype and help him figure out
what’s going wrong. Why the hell didn’t he think of this before? “Listen,” he says. “I’m in the
middle of a big project that’s not working out for me and I think you might be able to help. This
isn’t something we can do over the phone, which is why I want to fly you down to check it out in
person.”

“What kind of project?” Bruce asks, unable to hide the suspicion in his voice.

“I’ll show you when you get here. But consider this a job. I’m paying time plus travel.”

“Is this something to do with...?” He doesn’t need to finish the question; the implication is
obvious enough.

“Maybe,” says Tony. “Or maybe it’s just another one of my crazy schemes. I’ve kind of been into
those lately.”

“How about I call you on Skype,” Bruce suggests. “Now, or tomorrow? You can show me what
you’re working on.”

“Or I could call my pilot and have him take the jet up to this tiny airport of yours you still haven’t
named. I have him on speed dial. It would literally be easier than you making me go all the way
back downstairs to my computer and then me having to go through the whole hassle of installing
Skype.”

“You’d rather spend... How much does a flight even cost?! You’d rather spend that than take two
minutes to install a computer program?”

“Dr. Banner, if you even have to ask that question, you clearly don’t know me well enough. I’m
calling my pilot. Let me put you on hold.”
“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Free trip to California. All expenses paid. Private jet. I’m still trying to figure out which part of this you find so objectionable.”

“The part where...” Bruce groans. “It’s just not my style. It feels weird. It feels like I’d be taking advantage of you and your money. I don’t want to be that kind of person.”

“It’s not taking advantage when I’m offering. Pleading, even. If anything, I’m taking advantage of you. You just told me Fury doesn’t care where you work, so why not work down here for a while? And before you say another word,” Tony adds, “let me remind you that you were the one who contacted me, at midnight on Halloween. With that in mind, seriously, Bruce, buddy, did you expect anything less than total chaos to come out of this conversation?”

Bruce exhales loudly into the phone, filling Tony’s ear with a moment of white noise. “You’re right. It’s midnight, it’s Halloween, and of all the people in the world, I chose to talk to Tony Stark. Point made. I guess that means I’m taking a flight to Los Angeles.”

Even if there’s nobody around to see it, Tony smirks. “I knew you’d come around.”

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The first phrase out of Bruce’s mouth when he spots Tony’s Audi parked at the airport is, “Is that the same kind of car Zac Efron drove in 17 Again?”

The second phrase, after Tony stares at him for a couple seconds, is a sheepish, “It was on TV the other night. There’s not a lot else to do up in Bella Coola.”

“Zac Efron drove an Audi R8?”

“Maybe,” Bruce says with a shrug. “I’m not a car guy. I don’t know makes and models and all that by sight. But it looks the same, and has this same black part...”

And that’s all Tony needs to hear. By the time they arrive back at his place, his mind’s made up, and he tosses Bruce the keys. “Here. It’s yours.”

Bruce just blinks at him. “It’s... what?”

“The car. You can have it. I don’t want it any more. You’ll have to get a new license plate because Stark 4 is clearly mine, but the car is yours.”

“...You want to give me a car?”

“No, I just gave you a car. Are you hungry? We should’ve stopped for food. But I’ll order in. Do you like Thai?”

“Tony, no, you can’t give away a car!” Bruce insists as he grabs his duffel bag out of the back seat. “Not only because that’s crazy, but also there’s this problem of me living thousands of miles away in a different country.”

He tries to hand the keys back. Tony waves his hand aside. “Logic later. We’ll talk about that. I’ve actually thought it through and have a very sensible answer for you. For now, food. And quit making that lost puppy face.” He pats Bruce on the shoulder. “I’m sorry you’re now stuck with the social stigma of driving a Zac Efron car, but sometimes you just have to man up and take whatever fate throws your way.”
“I should spend time with you more often,” Bruce mutters. “I could probably live off your frivolous whims and hand-me-downs.”

“Probably,” Tony agrees. “So stick around. I also have this house in Phoenix I never want to see again, and you never know when it might be your lucky day.”

Bruce seems to decide it’s safer not to say anything in response to that, because he keeps his mouth shut until they’re inside. Even then, he only offers a few necessary mm-hms and okays as Tony shows him around the house. Guest bedroom. Bathroom. Kitchen. Gym. Pool. He takes it all in with an increasingly obvious sense of overwhelmed awe, and doesn’t speak a single full sentence until their food arrives and they’re seated in the kitchen with no more architectural distractions.

“So...” he starts. “You said you haven’t really talked to anybody since... New York.”

“No,” Tony answers.

“What have you been up to?”

Good question, that. Tony shrugs. “Usual things. I have this new project going. It takes up a lot of my time. Fourteen, fifteen hours straight... I lose track. And working out. I try to do at least four hours of cardio every day, and some strength training. Free weights, you know, at least two hours of that.”

“And you sleep when?” Bruce asks with both eyebrows raised.

There’s an ironic laugh clawing its way up in Tony’s throat that he has to choke back down. (Sleep? Ah ha ha, what’s that?) Sometimes he sleeps. Or at least he tries. Sometimes he nods off in the workshop, but never for more than an hour at a time. Sometimes he’ll sit there so tired he can’t see straight, yawning as he rubs his burning eyes, but the minute he gets upstairs and falls into bed... All that exhaustion evaporates. The second he turns off the lights it’s gone, replaced by restless tension. Most nights he has to force himself to go to bed around the four am mark, all for the pleasure of staring up at the ceiling or watching the alarm clock on his nightstand silently count its way up to seven o’clock, at which point he’ll write off sleep as a hopeless impossibility and stumble to the shower instead.

“I try to get six hours a night,” he says, looking down at his plate.

“Because after six hours in the gym and fourteen hours working on your project, I guess Tony Stark is so rich he can afford days with twenty-six hours in them?”

Shit. “Fourteen hours in the workshop was probably an exaggeration,” he says, but Bruce is already looking at him with that skeptic’s gaze.

“Do you... want to talk about anything?”

“Nope.” Why would he want to talk? What is there to talk about? Only Loki, and how his head is filled with memories of Loki, how his day is saturated with thoughts of Loki, how he can’t seem to focus on anything but Loki and his crushing need to see Loki...

“Are you sure?” Bruce keeps those eyebrows raised, and when Tony doesn’t answer, goes right on ahead. “It’s just... You seem kind of...”

“Kind of what?”

Bruce looks away. Whatever it is he wants to say, he can’t say it with eye contact. “Look, maybe
I’m wrong, I really hope I don’t come across as a jerk by saying this. That’s not what I want. But when I first arrived you seemed good. On the phone last night I had my doubts, but today at first you seemed really sharp and together. But after driving back from the airport, the tour around the house, chatting a constant stream of jokes and sarcastic wisecracks, constantly changing the subject, jumping from one thing to the next? Tony, you showed me where the gym was twice. You seem... ‘manic’ might be the right word for this. At first I thought you had to be high on cocaine, and it was kind of funny because yeah, rich guy, L.A., of course that’s it, right? But two hours later, it hasn’t stopped, and um.” He chews his lip. “Now I think this might be something else. So. Like I said. Do you want to talk about anything?”

“Nope,” Tony repeats. Even though he knows he’s lying to himself because there are other words that almost come out instead.

“Okay,” Bruce says slowly. “But if you change your mind and feel like saying anything... Anything at all. Just to say it and sound it out. Maybe saying something will help you sort through whatever you have bottled up inside.”

If only Bruce had any idea what he has bottled up inside.

Unfortunately, that bottle might be starting to open. “Have you ever...” he says after a long pause. “Have you ever met somebody that straight off the bat, it felt like you’ve known them forever? I know that sounds really stupid and cliché and I’m not talking about any best friends, kindred spirits bullshit. I just mean... It feels like this person has been in your life for as long as you can remember, for good or bad.”

“You mean Loki?”

The first time Tony hears that name in almost three months. It’s like a punch to the gut. “Yeah... him. I spent all of three weeks with him and it felt like we’d been together for thirty years. I don’t know. It was weird. I knew almost nothing about him but we had this... this comfort level, almost. Right from the start. It wasn’t friendship, and it wasn’t even that we liked each other. Sometimes people just work together. For whatever reason, we worked. We each understood the other.”

“Until he opened a portal to somewhere in deep space and triggered an alien invasion.”

No. Even after that. And during that. Tony still understood. Maybe now better than before. “That’s... kind of what I’ve been thinking about for the past couple months.”

“The invasion?”

“Loki’s reasons behind it. Why he went ahead with what he did.”

“Because that’s why he came to Earth in the first place,” says Bruce. “To grab the Tesseract so his alien friends could follow.”

But that’s not it; not exactly. Tony sits up straighter, leaning forward. “No, listen. I don’t think that was his plan. Maybe at first, but at the end? When it counted? No. All that careful scheming and he blew it at the end. Why?”

Bruce opens his mouth, but closes it again without saying a word, instead motioning with his hand for Tony to go ahead with whatever harebrained theory is about to come out.

It’s a good choice, because Tony’s harebrained theory was going to come out either way. “He wanted to lose.”
“Tony...” Bruce groans.

“I’m serious. He wanted to lose. He had every opportunity to succeed, and he took none of them, so the only logical conclusion is that he wanted to lose.”

“Oh he made a mistake.”

“Oh he wanted to lose. It’s the only explanation that makes sense. How long would it have taken him to initialize the portal? One minute? Two? Yet Natasha and I were downstairs for a good ten minutes just wasting time, and when I finally made it up to the roof he was still standing there, not having done a single thing, like he was waiting for me. Then? He let me stall him even more. Took every single hook I threw out and spent all that time telling me exactly what he was doing when he could have easily killed me or knocked me out and gone on with the show. And if you’d heard what he told me, about Thanos, about the Chitauri... If you’d been there, Bruce, I think you’d side with me on this. He didn’t want the Tesseract. He didn’t want Earth. He didn’t want anything except to get away from them, in whatever way he could!”

“He still opened the portal.”

“Yes,” says Tony, “but only at the last minute, after everything else, when he’d talked himself into it. When he knew I could stop him!”

There’s uncertainty lingering in Bruce’s eyes, though.

But why? There are too many questions, and too many inconsistencies, and all things that Tony can’t really explain. Why did Loki send him to get the scepter, when it wasn’t even necessary to open the portal? Loki knew – he knew – what effect it would have on Tony, and what it would trigger. Why would he bring only tens of thousands of Chitauri when he had to have known that would be nowhere near enough to carry out a full-scale war? “He had to lose,” Tony says out loud. “But he had to make it look like he was still trying to win.” It’s the only way he could ever escape from Thanos. Truly escape. “He had to let the Chitauri through. He had to start the invasion to fulfil his oath to Thanos. He had to put on a show of going through with it while still setting himself up to lose in the end. Don’t you see?”

Slowly, Bruce shakes his head. “Sorry. No. I don’t. I see a guy who tried to pull one over on all of us, and in the end, it got him in the back. And I see you maybe feeling guilty for shooting him, because you thought he was your friend. But you’re looking for reasons to forgive Loki for what he did. You’re grasping at excuses. And I get it.”

(No, he doesn’t, he doesn’t get anything at all...)

“You’ve been by yourself for three months, not talking to anybody, all alone in this big house after everything that happened. That’s a lot of time to think about things too much and forced-fit one and one together to make three. You want to exonerate Loki, so you start looking for clues and reading too much into his actions and maybe misremembering some of the.”

“No,” Tony says, flat out. “I’m not misremembering, and I’m not reading too much into anything. I know what I saw, and I know what Loki was trying to do. I’m sure of it. I’d bet my life on it. And I might be about to do just that.”

“You... What?” Bruce asks as those words sink in.

“I asked you to come down here for a reason. As much fun as it would be to just hang out and play X-Box and explore the totally legitimate science of seeing how well household objects blow up, I
had ulterior motives in inviting you to stay. I’m working on something. Something big.”

“Your ‘project’.”

Tony nods. “Yeah. And I think it’s time I showed what that’s all about.”

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Bruce’s hand is hesitant. Like it’s hovering over a live bomb, afraid of what might happen at the slightest movement. Carefully, slowly, he reaches down to touch the barrel of the HYDRA gun sitting on the table in Tony’s workshop. Eleven. There are eleven of them in all: three of the bulky old style left over from Steve’s day, and eight of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new models. One’s been taken apart already and its pieces lie scattered on the worktop. The naked energy casing glows a pale, electric blue.

“How did you get these?” Bruce asks.

Tony coughs. “Um. I may have promised Fury a few things about increasing range and accuracy in his designs.”

“You’re back in the weapons business?”

“Not exactly. That’s what I said I was doing. But I have the feeling that when Fury finds out what I’m actually doing, there’ll be a substantial price on my head.”

Bruce’s gaze shoots up, and he looks almost afraid to ask the question hanging from his tongue. “Are you putting HYDRA tech in your suit?!”

“Good guess, but no,” says Tony. “To tell you the truth, if I never see one of these guns fired again it’ll be too soon. I have a better project in mind. The reason I asked you to come down. You have a little more hands-on experience than I do with this, so...”

The click of everything falling into place in Bruce’s mind is almost audible. “Oh no. No no no. Tony, that’s... no.”

“Why not?” Tony asks, coming around to sit on the edge of the table. “The Tesseract is gone. It’s our only known method of wormhole travel, and it’s gone. And there’s nothing else like it. Except these guns. What’s trapped in these guns?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Tesseract energy, that’s what. What did Steve say back when we all met in the Tower? That a bunch of Nazis accidentally invented a teleportation ray seventy years ago? Seventy years ago! The technology’s already here! We’re looking at it! And if they could do that then, there’s no reason why I can’t perfect it now!”

“You’re trying to create another portal,” Bruce says, staring at him with a look that just repeats what he said a second ago: you can’t be serious. “Another gateway to Asgard.”

Tony nods. “Yeah. And I’m close. Really close. Like... two or three minor tweaks away close.”

“Because of Loki.”

Because of Loki, Tony thinks, but doesn’t say. Because of Loki. Because it feels like he’s still part of my life, and every day I catch myself thinking of things I want to tell him, or turning around and
“I know you don’t really understand,” he says instead, which Bruce answers with a sad little shake of his head. “But this is something... It’s something I have to do. I don’t need you to believe me, and I don’t need you see things from my point of view, I just need you to accept what I’m doing. Bruce... For the first time in my life, I’ve done something wrong – really wrong – that I can’t fix. Not here. Not with what I have. And I need to fix it. Upstairs in the kitchen you called me ‘manic’, and yeah, I agree with you. There are times when I can’t sleep, I can’t focus, I can’t do anything, because there’s this pressure in my head telling me I fucked up, that this isn’t finished, and I need to finish it. I know I won’t be happy until I do. So...” He pushes his hair back from his forehead, feeling sweat and heat against his palm. “I haven’t talked to anybody because I don’t want to talk to anybody. I haven’t seen anybody because I don’t want to see anybody. I just want this. That’s all. This.”

“And you’re willing to risk your life?” asks Bruce. “This is really sketchy tech. We don’t know enough about how it works or what it can do. It could misfire or have unexpected side effects or just plain not work right. Even if you succeed in opening a portal, if it’s not 100% perfect, the second you touch it...”

“I could die. I know. I could be turned inside out. Did you ever see that Jeff Goldblum remake of The Fly? I could be that. But I also could’ve died on the tower rooftop three months ago. And I could’ve died three weeks before that in Atlantic City when Romanoff had one of these guns in my face. I could’ve been killed at any time by a couple different guys that wanted to kill me. Or you know what? I could’ve died from palladium poisoning, or by some freak accident testing out my suit, or hell, even in a car crash with my parents in 1991. I could’ve died a lot.”

“That’s not the same.”

“I could die half an hour from now if I piss you off too much and you Hulk out on me.”

“Tony...” Bruce warns.

“Five minutes from now?”

“There’s a difference between accidental death and deliberately putting yourself in harm’s way.”

“Something I would know nothing about having spent the last two years as Iron Man,” Tony counters. “You’re not going to change my mind. I’m doing this. What I want to know is, are you going to help me?”

Now it’s Bruce’s turn to push his hair back. And adjust his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know if I can in good conscience do anything to assist with this... whatever it is you’re doing.”

“But can you, in good conscience, help me work out the bugs and make it safer? I told you. I’m doing this one way another. By myself, I might come out the other side of that portal as Jeff Goldblum. But with your help, it might work.”

Bruce doesn’t answer immediately. He looks up at the ceiling, and across the room, and down at the table of guns.

“I have the energy source, Bruce. According to my calcs, I have enough energy in those guns to keep a portal open for almost twenty seconds.”

“Selvig and I weren’t able to open any kind of portal at all, even when we had the Tesseract itself.
Without Loki’s magic, it won’t work.”

“I have Loki’s scepter.”

With a sharp turn of the head, Bruce’s eyes snap over to Tony. “How…”

“Let’s not discuss the how,” says Tony. “Officially speaking, if anybody asks, I didn’t just say that, and it’s not here. Some... shady dealings may have been involved.” Shady as in dark and underhanded, involving a word that rhymes with ‘weft’ from an organization that rhymes with ‘field’, but that’s beside the point. “Important thing is, with the influence of that scepter, I know we can get the portal to work. So I have the energy. And I have the magic wand. All I need is a little help finalizing the device. Are you in?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce starts, but Tony cuts him off.

“No wimping out here, pal. Straight up. Yes or no. You in or out?”

Exhaling loudly, Bruce rubs his nose again. “Well,” he says. “Really? When I think about it? I mean, really think about it? Keeping in mind that my only priority is to mitigate disaster and keep you from doing something dumb. But.” A faint smile begins to crack across his face. “How cool would it be if this actually worked?”

Tony grins in reply. “Let’s make ourselves a goddamn space hole.”

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Chapter End Notes

Dear all,

Thank you so much for reading! It's been several months and well over 100k words (whut), but this thing is finally complete. I really can't thank you all enough for your comments and kudos and support of this story. :)

This ends on kind of a "wait, what?" note, which can really only mean one thing: there will be a sequel! And it's now being posted! Go on and check out "A Plague of Loki" to see what happens to our intrepid couple next...

Notifications for all totally legitimate, high-class, scholarly literary works I may force upon this archive will be posted on my Tumblr (http://fullofleaves.tumblr.com/).

Once again, thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy what's coming up next.

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Works inspired by this one

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