Summary

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Six months after the battle of New York, the Chitauri return to earth for another attack, successfully destroying populated areas and leading to millions of deaths. The Avengers have split up, each of them going their own way after the devastating assault. But after having locked himself away in his Malibu Mansion for months, Tony gets a visit from Loki, who makes him an unexpected offer that changes everything.

Post-Avengers, Frostiron
Notes

The first fic of me and a friend, entirely based on our RP. Since this is the first time we are actually posting something of our writings, we are a little nervous about it, so we would really appreciate some feedback, critical or complementary. Also, we're not native speakers so please excuse eventual odd phrases or sayings, but we had a wonderful beta-reader, Yue1234 from fanfiction.net, who helped us a lot.

Explicit Rating for:
- Genocide
- Very detailed Gore
- Explicit Sexual Content
- Alcohol/Drug Abuse
The sphere between the realms of Ydrassil was timeless, the god knew. Nevertheless, the time he spent in between her roots, fleeing the Chitauri, felt like a millenia, like half an eternity.

The Chitauri were unforgiving creatures, lusting for his blood as payment for their fallen comrades. Their determination to catch the god and to regain what had been stolen from them was unbreakable. They wanted to torture and kill the wanna-be king they had once dared to turn into their puppet, so they could eventually reforge their wounded honor.

Never again Loki would fall into their mercy.

The Chitauri's attack had occurred months after Loki had been returned to his former home by Thor and then sentenced to imprisonment by Asgardian law. The Golden Realm had not been prepared for it.

The Trickster should have known: The realm of the gods was arrogant, blind to the dangers that lurked far away in the shadows of the universe – the Aesir had never thought it possible that they could be harmed by alien forces. Loki could have told them, since he had sensed the upcoming and long anticipated attack days before, but no one would have listened to the fallen prince.

Not after what he had done.

Moreover, Loki's thoughts had become bitter, filled with hatred for the ones he had thought of as family in times not so long past. A part of him had lusted to see them burn.

Yet in the end, after it was all over, the god wished he had warned them.

Everything had started when violent tremors shook the earth, a vibration in the air that created a humming sound and left a feeling of static on Loki's skin, a strange tingling sensation that had made his flesh creep in anticipation. Seconds later, the air outside had filled with terrible screams as the first attackers shot down from the sky and covered the city in fire. The agonizing cries and pitiful shrieks of the masses had been loud enough to be audible through the small window of the cell they held him captive in.

In another time, Loki might even have enjoyed the sound - but not today.

It had taken the hordes of the Chitauri only mere minutes to find their way down into the vaults of Asgard, where they had processed to kill the guards and destroy the massive metal door that had contained the Trickster.

He had not cared to speak to them nor hesitate in any way.

With his bare hands, Loki had killed them all - that much he was still capable of, even though he was far from being in his best condition. He had wrung necks, snapped bones, and crushed their ugly, reptilian skulls, until the attackers had been nothing more than silent, unmoving corpses on the ground. With one of their energy-blades, Loki had been able to cut the magic-binding shackles off his
wrists and leave the cell, picking up one of the dead guard's spears as he went.

The god had known the Chitauri had not come specifically for him - despite any oaths of vengeance – for not even their most treacherous ally was worth this much effort. No, they were after something far more valuable, an artifact worthy of destroying worlds and sacrificing whole peoples for:
The Tesseract, the last piece required for them to obtain absolute dominance in the universe, which was hidden deep inside Asgard's weapons' vault.

Loki might not have been sane - maybe he never had been – and his thoughts were twisted, so tortuous sometimes even he did not understand them. Yet, there was one thing he was sure of: Thanos must not be allowed possession of the cosmic cube.

Luckily, the Chaos god had reached the vault before the attackers.

Except for the faint screaming and battle noises coming from above, the halls beneath Asgard had become silent. Their usual guards had been busy fighting outside, or already lying dead somewhere, killed by intruders. So, Loki passed, unchallenged, through the halls towards the vaults.
He had gone this way many times, and still remembered every stone of it. The doors of the huge room had opened easily for him, for the magical defenses had weakened, unable to withstand any being that possessed magic - and Loki possessed a lot of it.
As did the Chitauri.

There, inside, he had found it:
the cube, glowing its usual pure and mesmerizing blue, positioned on the pedestal where the Casket of Ancient Winters had once been exhibited - that was before Loki had decided to steal it, back in a time which now felt like another life.

Loki's steps had slowed at the sight of it, the sounds of battle ceasing for a moment as the cold, energetic light of the Tesseract fell across his face, completely taking him in.
Time had seemed to stop around him, everything blurring into a mess of colors and fading into the background. Everything became meaningless compared to the infinite blue in front of him.
With a slow stretch of his hands, the god had reached out for the cube and taken it, his fingers tingling.

Even before touching it, Loki had felt a connection to the Tesseract - but not with this level of intensity, not with the surging feeling that he held the entire universe in his hands, the sensation of being dragged down into the blinding blue light, not-

Inhuman screeches at the other end of the vault had torn the god out of his mesmerized state and, without wasting a second more, he had allowed his magic to carry him away in a whirl of color and light.

Asgard would be fine without him, and without the Tesseract.
Loki had been sure of that.

Despite all of his efforts to keep hidden, Loki's enemies had kept track of him. They had found him in the forests of Alfheim and burned them down, he had not been able to escape them in Vanaheim, where the beasts had destroyed entire towns searching for him, devouring everything and leaving behind nothing but a burning path of death and destruction.

They had found him everywhere: on the most distant of moons and on dead planets without suns
that were frozen to a degree even Aesir would not have been able to survive. The Chitauri had chased him until he had lost track of time, fleeing through the branches of Ydrassil in a never-ending flight. Even in the shadows of her roots, in the darkest corners of the Nine Realms, he had not found shelter.

There was no escape.

So it came to pass that Loki, God of Mischief and Chaos, now found himself on a barren rock orbiting Midgard, his weary gaze fixed on the blue planet. His energy was drained, his muscles aching with every movement, protesting against the cruel exertion, demanding rest, immediate rest - and he was tired, just so tired. Yet, the simple fear of what might happen if the creatures found him had kept him running for what felt like eons.

God or not, every living being has a point where it can go no further - and now, Loki had reached that point.

It was a cruel joke: he was in the possession of the most powerful object in the universe, but he had neither the resources nor the knowledge to use it. The Tesseract was continuously speaking to him, wordless whispers filled with promises of endless strength and energy, but it was in vain, futile, only frustrating - Loki could not use the cube's power no matter how hard he tried.

Life had been a tragedy before, before all of this, but that tragedy had seemingly found its grand finale.

It was painful, shaming to admit, but Loki desperately needed help.

Help from someone who was able to use the Tesseract's energy, who could enable him to use the energy for himself, and who could protect him from the Chitauri, at least for a little while.

Whether he liked it or not, a Midgardian was the obvious choice. Yes, they were mortals, but these mortals had proven to be capable of much more than anyone would have guessed. They had burned a whole Chitauri ship out of the sky and, as defensive and determined as they were, they would do it again.

But who would give him shelter, who could turn the Tesseract into a useful weapon?

Names flooded through the god’s mind, images of faces he had almost forgotten flashed in front of his eyes as he remembered the mortals he had been dealing with during his attempt to subjugate mankind. He thought of Fury, Barton, Selvig, and a dozen others he had met during his short time on Midgard, but none of them fitted his needs.

It was hard for Loki to concentrate, and he had to close his eyes to think, his brows furrowed in concentration. Something was in the air, and his senses were screaming alarm - the Chitauri were close by, likely to attack at any moment.

Then Loki’s mind stopped at the memory of one particular mortal: the one with the smug grin, the big mouth with empty rhetoric, and the appalling amount of self-confidence. What had been his name? Stark?

Yes, Stark, he had even written the name all over his hideous building. Of all the people the god could think of, Stark seemed the one most likely to help him.
An Avenger, his enemy, yes – but on the other hand, that mortal had approached him even when they had stood at the brink of war and tried to offer the god some comfort. Not that he had wanted any of it at the time.

As Loki thought about it, more and more information flooded in, emphasizing his idea. Facts Barton's mind had revealed for him and facts he had picked up himself before he had gone to war with Midgard:
that Stark had been known to be a master of human technology, that he had developed the world's best weapons before he had whitewashed his name, and that he was a man of great wealth and therefore great power.

Yes, he would visit Stark.

He would have the man build him a weapon with the Tesseract's energy - whether by Stark's own volition or not.
Loki would make him do it, no matter what.

A small glimpse of the mortal's image in his mind was enough to let Loki's magic carry him away into nothingness, out of the infinite emptiness of space and to the place where the mortal dwelled.
He clutched the Tesseract tightly to his chest, hidden under his shredded cloak – it was the one thing that put his life in danger, but was his only way to freedom at the same time.

When Loki opened his eyes, he found himself in a dark room.

Gravity now pressed down on him, telling him he had made it back to earth.
Arrival

It took a lot for Tony Stark to let his outward appearance slide.

They all said he was nothing but show, and in the end it was true to a certain degree, because he really was all show for most people. You never knew what was going on on the inside, all you saw was hair in a thought-out composition, a beard carefully trimmed down to stubble, and a smile which never faded, like it had been sculpted on his face.

In short, the perfect performance.

It took time and persistence to bore through that mask, to worm out worries and sorrows from this always troubled mind - showing vulnerability was something the billionaire simply refused to do. So, for Tony Stark to have stopped caring about his performance and allowed people to actually see that he felt miserable and broken, some terrible things must have happened.

After Pepper's funeral, he had retreated to Malibu, alone.

It was pure self-torture to walk and live in the same house where she had lived, to sleep in the the bed they had shared, and to see things she touched and used everyday, but he would not live anywhere else.

Besides, where else would he go?

Stark Tower, like most of Manhattan and the greater parts of New York, was a heap of rumble. Half of the East Coast had been devastated in the Chitauri attack, and he had stopped counting the number of deaths weeks ago.

In the end, it had taken only one death for him to lose ground, him, a man who had been repeatedly marked as the personified Phoenix from the ashes, both by the papers and himself. Now, the title was mere derision and a week ago, he had stopped watching the news entirely. He simply could not hear it any longer.

Hundreds of people had died and again, he, Tony Stark, was in the news.

All of them, the Avengers, would have been, if they had not left. Nobody knew where Bruce was. There were some speculations, of course, but no solid evidence. Natasha, who had vanished a week after the attack, had made sure that nobody knew where she was, although Tony was sure he had seen the red of her hair under a black veil at Pepper's funeral. Clint was one of the last men standing at S.H.I.E.L.D., one of the handful of agents who had not been wiped out by the attack, and was now scraping together the remains of what had once been one of the mightiest secret organization in the world. Nobody knew where he was either, but there were rumors that Fury was staying in Malaysia with the rest of his men.

In regards to Thor, nobody even knew if he was still alive. His loyalty to earth and the Avengers had lasted only as long as the attack had been focused on the planet of his mortal friends and allies, but when Asgard had sent a cry for help, he had left immediately. Nobody had blamed him, but his powers had been desperately needed when the Chitauri ripped their cities apart.
When they heard what had happened on Asgard, all of them understood why he could not return to Earth for several months. No one dared to send him congratulations on his accession to the throne - not under those circumstances.

The only Avenger who continued to live in public was Steve. He, along with Tony, was all over the news: you saw him rebuilding walls and helping children in the streets, which were only vaguely recognizable as those of New York. It was like people clung to the image of superheroes, creating hope out of the belief that if people like the Avengers could struggle past their losses, so could they.

But Tony could not bear it any longer.

Living alone in a giant house for three months now, he had managed to achieve a state of being which allowed him to live without going mad. Systematically, he had turned off every potential source of pain and numbed every sensitive cell in his body. His alcohol consumption could only be described as world-weary, and combined with the various sleeping pills and antidepressants he took, perhaps even suicidal.

Still, insomnia tormented him and when sleep overwhelmed him during the strangest hours of the day, it was an endless stringing together of nightmares - there was no lesser evil.

During the first few weeks, he had drowned in thoughts. He had imagined scenarios of the future, alternate versions in which he could have saved her - the never ending why. When he had become aware that there was no end to it, no answer which would satisfy him or dull the pain, he had simply given up.

If not for the weekly visits from Rhodey and the almost daily calls from Steve, he might as well have fallen apart without having the power to pull himself together. He was a strictly rational man, at least he thought of himself as one, with a good portion of self-love and a strong will to live. Giving up on oneself did not fit into this image.

However, he had stopped living for his own years ago and now, when he found himself in a situation where he needed to continue living for his own sake, he could not find the quality in such a life any longer.

And so, he spent his days alone in his house, not leaving the premises unless necessary or if he was wasted to the point of driving himself off a cliff in his Bugatti. He never pulled through, though.

More and more, life begun to feel like sleep-walking to him.

Most of the time, he worked: useless, pointless, purposeless machines and devices building under his hands. He ate, he did some sport from time to time.

There was no company-stuff to deal with any longer, fortunately. If he would have cared even the tiniest bit, he would have gone up the walls about the fact that they had kicked him out of Stark Industries the first opportunity.

It was just: nothing felt entirely real to him, nothing felt important. And he was always tired.

Rhodey spoke of severe symptoms of depression, the internet said that too, and Tony knew they were probably right, but he did not care.
At the moment, he could not see a time in his future where he could possibly reach the level of happiness he had been at with Pepper in New York. She had been the one good thing in his life - so why bother to get up from the ground again when she was gone?

The inventor did not need his best friend to tell him that he was a mere shadow of himself, that he needed to get back to his life again. He just needed time for himself and Whiskey - bottles over bottles of Whiskey.

Tony was skimming through a heap of paper on his living room table that had been mounting higher and higher for weeks now. With burning eyes, he had read a random mixture of missed invitations, letters of sympathy, and polite, yet distanced information on company-stuff without really reading it, letting most of it fall to the floor without much concern.

Some time in between glancing at an invitation to Petco's annual puppy parade and skimming a letter from the former vice-president informing about the latest about metal imports, sleep must had overcome him. It was always that mean kind of insidious microsleep which often enough ended with him startling awake the second his head hit the table.

"What evil has befallen you, mortal?"

A sharp voice cut through the silence like a knife. Short after, the sound of controlled footsteps came out of the darkness, leaving their owner in the unknown. Only an intense, yellowish-green glow flickered in the periphery of Tony's field of vision, making him lift his head slowly.

It took him several seconds to adapt his already alcohol-impaired sight to the darkness which surrounded his visitor. When he had eventually made out the familiar form, the well-known sound of the snide voice, and had attributed the faint play of light to the incomparable glistening of magic he knew from Loki's hands, his subconscious reflexes kicked in and yelled 'Danger!'..

The inventor scrambled to his feet, lost his balance for a moment, and nearly fell over, causing his chair to bang on the floor. Now standing, although swaying and insecure on his feet, he should have felt better, or at least more prepared for a potential fight. Instead, his head was spinning and making him dizzy, making it clear that anything requiring more effort than just standing straight would not be happening today.

Tony focused his gaze on the god, who had stepped out of the shadows by now, and used him as a fixed point, more to steady himself than to keep an eye on the enemy.

Only now did he become aware of how wrecked Loki looked, his impressive battle armor torn to shreds, black from dried blood. One horn on his helmet was missing from what seemed to be past fights, and the surface of his golden ornaments were covered in deep scratches, the plates partly broken. His noble, even features were haunted and worn-out, eyes glimmering darkly but dimly.

Tony frowned, but could not, by any stretch of imagination, see the sense in this encounter.

Why was Loki standing in his living room? What did he want from him? Was he here to kill him? But why now?
Where the hell did he even come from?!

Realizing how utterly ridiculous the situation was after everything that had happened within the last year, he could not help but let out an inappropriately timed laugh. It sounded strange in this atmosphere and his laughter had faded as fast as it had started, changing his expression from the former irritation to embittered aversion.

"What do you want, Unicorn?", he asked, alluding to the trickster's destroyed helmet. Although his words were slurred and not entirely comprehensible, the undertone was cold with distaste.

Loki was the little bitch everything had started with.

He had showed the Chitauri the way to earth, and had brought them here with Death as their playmate. If not for the pitiful state he was now in, the billionaire would have gone at the god. Unfortunately, he had to put up with the fact that Loki looked like he had had a hard time as well.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's no way you can make my 'befallen evil' worse."

"I am not here to make anything worse. Quite the contrary,"

The god grinned, exposing his teeth, which were partially darkened by a smeared black liquid.

"But before I tell you my glorious offer, I want to know what's happened to you. Have your friends left you? Is the knowledge of your unimportance in the cosmic world too much for you to bear? Or has it all been a masquerade from the very beginning?"

The trickster's eyes narrowed.

"No...it is something different. Something happened...You lost something you always thought yours - am I right with that assumption?"

The god slowly sneaked closer to him, circling him with slow and graceful movements with every muscle in his body tensed like a predator's, ready to strike its prey.

Tony was swaying, dourly trying to follow the slow movements with his eyes, but his vision blurred every few seconds and even the slightest movement of his eyes hurt. Although he remained in stubborn silence at Loki's assumptions, he knew he would be defenseless if this came to a real fight. There was nothing to do but to wait until he knew what the god was up to, because right now, he still failed to see any reason behind Loki's appearance other than to mock him for his misery.

Maybe that was enough for him.

With one fluid step, Loki was suddenly in front him, completely catching him off guard. The god grabbed him by the hair at the back of his neck and pulled harshly at it, forcing his head back and leaving his throat exposed. Tony let out a sharp gasp of pain, but it ebbed away into dull nothingness easily, leaving him empty again. His eyes stared at the ceiling and his arms hung uselessly at his side, unable and not willing to find the energy to fight.

"Tell me, little mortal."

Tony could feel Loki's eyes wander over his body, taking in the slight bump of his skin where his adams apple was almost hidden by the hair of his unshaven face, as well as his rugged clothing, and greasy hair.
At this range he could probably make out every horrible detail of his skin, every pore and stubble, and the inventor could only guess what he looked like: dark, violet circles under his swollen eyes, dry skin, cracked lips, and small cuts at random places all over his skin, face, neck, arms, induced by shattered glass. He had stopped caring about them, he simply did not feel them any longer.

The last time he had looked at himself in a mirror, he had crushed it with his fist.

"It's Pepper."

His voice was a mere whisper, hoarse from the angle in which Loki held his neck.

He was not frightened by the closeness of death, the realization that he might get killed in a few seconds caused no alarm.

He was not even scared of the fact that it did not matter to him whether he survived this or not. A part of him was even begging internally for Loki to end this, it was a pathetic part, a part he usually did not listen to, just a small piece of himself he hid in the darkest corner of his mind.

When Loki tightened his grip, asking him to speak more clearly, Tony swallowed hard, causing his throat to ache in that unhealthy angle, and licked his lips before he answered.

"They killed ... my girlfriend."

It sounded odd to call her such, they had never referred to each other in those trivial terms. Pepper had always been Pepper and there had been no other word which had been able to describe their relationship adequately. He had called her pet-names and she had loved it, but it had been their private game and to others she had always been Pepper.

Yet, Loki had never met her, so he probably would not understand it anyway.

In an abrupt movement, Tony was released from the god's grip and stumbled backwards, his fall fortunately cushioned by the couch (usually, he missed it).

For a second, he felt like he might vomit, but the nausea faded as fast as it had come.

Squinting his eyes and opening them again, he sat up, pressing a hand against his head as if the pressure might help stop the world around him from shaking. When his sight cleared again, he focused on the face above him, yet he could not quite see it, everything felt further away than it actually was.

The whole chain of events had cleared his mind at least a bit and pumped some adrenaline through his veins, although he was still far from being useful for anything other than spitting rancorous words at Loki.

"What could you want from me other than sneering? Come to conquer earth again? Go on, I don't think there'll be much defense."

Loki's expression did not reveal anything. When he answered, his voice was as smooth and cold as always.

"No, this time I have come to save it. The Chitauri are not only attacking your realm, but also the eight remaining ones. It is quite annoying."

There was silence while Loki stared down at him.

Chitauri attacking the other realms?
No surprise in that - why should anyone be the sole exception? After what they had done here on
Earth, moving on to other planets to continue was the only logical step for a people seeking universal hegemony through war.

Tony felt his senses sharpen a bit, his gaze locking on Loki's. Even if there were universes falling to the Chitauri, what did it have to do with Loki? What did it have to do with him? Loki answered his unspoken question without much delay.

"And why am I coming to you, you are asking yourself right at this moment? The answer is simple. You will build me a weapon to fulfill the task of saving the realms."

Tony's brows knitted together in confusion and disbelief. What?!

"Do not say anything, mortal. I am, of course, gracious and will offer you something to work with."

Before Tony could even open his lips, a small movement of Loki's hand made him freeze. He could not do anything other than stare in awe as the god pulled the Tesseract out from beneath his shredded cloak. Illuminating the whole room in intense blue light, the magical object lay calmly in his slender hands.

"A pretty little cube, is it not?"

Loki smirked when he saw Tony's face. Then, the god brought his hand to his face and, with a slow swipe of his tongue, licked the cube's glowing blue surface.

Tony's gaze lingered on the glimmering blue of the Tesseract, the billowing patterns inside causing a mesmerizing effect.

It was beyond his understanding how the cube had come into Loki's possession again, and why on earth he did not simply use it just like this, but he felt these questions were irrelevant just now. He still could not quite break away from the intense blue when he answered Loki, the light glistening in the dark of his bloodshot eyes.

“Interesting offer...”, he mumbled with a heavy tongue.

It was an alluring thought: the Tesseract. It appealed to the lowest of urges within him: thirst for power, the desire to regain control - gruesome vengeance.

The engineer heaved himself from the couch, unsteadily approaching his uninvited visitor who held one of the greatest miracles of the universe in his hand like it was some kind of toy. The closer he came, the more the light became blinding and he had to narrow his eyes, so he focused on Loki again. When he stopped close to the man and continued speaking, he concentrated hard on getting his message across, although the words seemed to evaporate in his head every time he wanted to form them into proper sentences.

"... but I think I have to decline."

The irritated expression on Loki's face gave him a strange satisfaction and his mouth pulled up into a smirk, making his dry and lacerated lips hurt.

“Think about it for just a second”, he mused, “Me joining forces with you, for the minimal chance of you defeating the Chitauri alone, without a tongue in cheek? I may be wasted, but I'm not a
fucking retard. Don't insult me."

He knew somewhere in his mind that it was probably not a good idea to anger the god, but his inborn imprudence was only increased by the dangerous mixture of a proper jag, and it was not like there was much too lose anyway.

Besides, he had been lacking a scapegoat for the last few disasters in his life, and after the umpteenth time, destroying his furniture (or an entire coastal part) with his suit lost its appeal.

"Who do you think you are, coming here after what happened, asking for my support?! You're no fucking savior, you're the guileful bastard who brought them to earth and I'll watch happily, munching my popcorn, while they take you apart piece by piece. Look around at what you've triggered with your brainless strive for power! There's nothing they've left unscathed, they fucked the entire universe! They fucked me up, they fucked up earth, and they fucked up Asgard. Even your brother's a frigging wreck! So what makes you think you can turn to me, you little shit? You want me to build you a weapon, after everything you have caused - why not just hand you a goddamn reward for it?!"

It was not hard to sound offending, all the spite and bitterness spouted from his lips without his assistance. He did not even notice that he had become louder and louder with a fast increase of swearwords in his slurred speech.

When he was done, he had closed the distance between them almost entirely, swaying unsafely on his feet, pulse racing by now, and jaws clenched in anger.

Loki's eye had widened in shock for a split-second the moment he had mentioned his once-brother, but the abrupt force with which the god grabbed him by throat came totally unexpected.

"What did you just say about Thor?!!"

The might with which Loki rammed his body against the wall made him see stars for a second, his body convulsing in the urge to cough, but unable to do so, because of the unbreakable grip and the lack of air.

Loki's features were a fearsome grimace, his teeth bared in fury and desperation and his grip strong enough to break bone.

"Is Thor alive?!"

The sharp voice rang in Tony's ears, full of unhidden agony, but also the harsh tone of anger, making it perfectly clear that a wrong answer would cost lives.

Like an unwanted piece of trash, the Tesseract lay forgotten on the floor.

Reflexively, Tony's hands grabbed the god's wrists, but he did not have enough power to loosen Loki's grip.

The pressure on his throat was merciless, and he could do nothing but stare at Loki, wide-eyed, unable to utter a single word with his body too busy struggling against impending suffocation.

"Is he alive?!", Loki repeated, almost screaming now, and, with growing impatience, he looked like he was about to snap.

For half a second, the god adjusted his hand and Tony used the break to swallow once and then croak a barely audible "Yes."

A moment later, Loki fiercely pulled the billionaire from the wall and tossed him onto the floor
like he was nothing more than a puppet.

Coughing uncontrollably, Tony curled up, trying to steady himself with his hands, until he eventually managed to get to his knees and support his upper body with his hand on the floor. He gasped for air as the stimulus slowly vanished and the pain eased a bit. He rolled around again, leaning heavily against the couch, and tried to steady his breathing, but he felt awful and sick and just wanted to be left alone.

Yet, the god stayed.

Only now it dawned on Tony how desperate Loki had looked moments ago, how his cool persona had crumbled away when Tony had mentioned his brother - the man, who Tony thought, he hated most. The man he had tried to kill several times.

Things were making less and less sense with every minute. A curiosity he had considered lost rose in him again, and he looked up, meeting Loki's gaze.

"Where the hell have you been all this time? Asgard has fallen. There's not much left I think, but they refuse to tell us the whole story, haughty schnooks. And Thor..."

One might think he paused for the dramatic effect, but he was way too exhausted to think of such things - he simply needed to catch breath.

"Thor is king.", Tony laughed drily at the cruel irony of fate, "And a cripple. I haven't seen him for a while, but it's something with the leg. I don't know, something with the... face, too," he made some vague gestures along his face which would imply an injury on his jaw.

"Told you, it's a mess. No, fuck off and leave, okay? If there's any more whirling around, I will puke on you. I swear, this is no joke."

It should have pleased him to see that even Loki had his losses to mourn, but in a way, it did not fit the image of a scapegoat he had so easily projected on him. And Thor... Thor was still his friend, too.

A violent shudder had run through the Chaos God's body when Tony had stopped speaking, then he had turned around and started pacing through the room, muttering incoherently to himself. He stopped at one point to bend down and pick up the Tesseract before he repeated his actions, his gaze sometimes traveling over to the place where Tony stood.

It was hard to make out anything in the god's mumbling, Tony never understood more than a few words like 'how', 'unexpected' and 'only possibility'. The last one was repeated several times before the god suddenly came to an halt, body tense, every muscle strained.

Then, he simply disappeared, but before the billionaire could allow himself to let the tension fade from his body, he came back into existence with a nervous glimmer, then flickered a few times, quite like a slowly dying flame.

"What?"

Loki sounded genuinely surprised, raising his hands and staring at the inner palms as if they were personally responsible for everything bad in the world. Then, horror began building on his face, and Tony felt a thrumming pain at his temples emerge when he forced his head to figure out what the hell could be happening that would cause the previously composed god to lose his cool so quickly.
"Nononono, NO! Not now!"

The wrecked god whirled around, pure terror exposed on his face as green eyes met brown ones.

"You!"

A thin white finger was pointed at Tony, who was completely oblivious as to what was going on. Things were happening too fast and too out of order, the panic needed more time to feel real to him. But Loki had no time to waste.

"Get me a weapon! Anything!"

There was a pure, hectic edge of fear in the god's voice, and he soon drew out the Tesseract, making it vanish in his now violently shivering hands.

Before Loki could react further, or the engineer even had a chance to ask what the fuck was going on, there was an explosion of blue and purple fire that knocked both of them off their feet.

Thick, blueish smoke filled the room, revealing twelve Chitauri when it dissipated. They were black skinned beasts covered in strange, organic looking armors, and each one of them was armed with a different weapon.

Even from his position on the floor, with the dust biting at his irritated eyes, and a wave of nausea flooding through him again, Tony realized that these creatures were more, far more, than the common Chitauri warrior he was known to.

These were creatures out of the darkest depths of the cosmos, sent by their unknown leaders themselves.
"Holy shit!" the inventor yelled at the sight of the Chitauri, flinching instinctively.

"Jarvis, the suit! Prepare the suit, now!"

Tony scrambled backwards, running into the edge of the table and nearly falling again. He did not take his eyes off the intruders until he was far enough away to be able to turn around and simply run. He did not even think for a second about Loki - there was no room for caring about an enemy when one's own survival instincts were kicking in like a tsunami of adrenaline.

Tony's reaction had been an automatic one, it had become second nature to him to get into the suit as soon as there was a sign of immediate danger. Only now did it occurred to him, that he was barely able to run in a straight line - there was no way he'd be able to do close combat right now.

At least he had an automatic targeting system.

Before he was within reach of any of his suits, an energy blast carried Tony off his feet and sent him faceplanting into floor.

The thought that a Chitauri-spear would probably impale him at any moment rushed through his head, but strangely, it did not happen. He had time enough to get on his feet again, to grab one of Pepper's hideous bronze statues from the sideboard, and to turn to parry the the strike of the Chitauri's spear.

The spear's impact sent him tumbling to the floor again, and a quick glace around the room told him the only reason he had only one of the beasts to deal with, was that the eleven others had gathered around Loki.

Clearly, they were looking for him and not for Tony - they had to know about the Tesseract.

For a second, the billionaire understood Loki's wrecked appearance and blind panic only too well.

Again, the god had brought a life-threatening danger right into Tony's own home, and although the genius had been lingered in the dark during the last few weeks, more dead than alive, he sure as hell was not going to die because of these bastards.

An idea easier thought than realized.

All he could do was do his best to counter the attacks of the alien soldier while scraping along on the floor.

A sudden stab at his chest overextended his slowed-down reflexes and in one fluid motion, the sharp tip of the spear pierced through the skin and muscle right under his left collarbone.

Tony gasped in pain, and the statue in his hand went down with uncoordinated force, hitting the Chitauri's knee in an unexpected fluke.

With a cracking noise and a screech from its ugly mouth, the beast fell to its knees, and Tony scrambled to his feet again, pressing a hand to his chest wound to stop the blood flow.

He heard Loki scream behind him, the sound accompanied by blasts of energy and shattering glass, but Tony dared not to look behind him.
he other Chitauri were onto him now, too, their blue fire shot holes in the walls just behind his
head when he hurried down the stairs into his workshop.

He had not known he was able to run so fast when drunk and injured - even though it was more of a
constant struggle against the pulling force of gravity than the actual coordinated action of running.

The screeching noises of the Chitauri could be heard from the stairs and in sheer panic, Tony
grabbed one of the weapons he had stored by the stairs for safety reasons, and fired blindly in the
direction of their screeches.
When one of the alien body's rumbled lifelessly down the stairs, he could not believe his luck, but
a second later he had to bare his teeth as his wound sent a sharp pain through his body.
With his weapon carelessly dropped on the floor, Tony stumbled further into the back of his
workshop, where the suits awaited him in a dark corner.

When he reached the Mark VI, he fell backwards into the armor, panting heavily as the metal
enclosed his body and gave him at least an illusion of security.

Blasts of alien energy hit just a few feet besides him, melting the chest piece of the Mark III and
Tony hissed at Jarvis to shoot. Four Chitauri were down in the workshop, two of them equipped
with heavy guns, one of them with some sort of double-sided short spear, and the last giving
commands behind them.

Tony found himself backed into a corner, barely able to evade the attackers before the suit fired
self-aiming missiles and knocked out the two with the guns.
He started his stabilizers and rushed forward, taking the one with the spear - since he seemed to be
the greatest threat - brutally with him to crash into the nearest wall, shattering the shelf positioned
there and everything on it.

The beast, momentarily dazed, gave its head a shake before it began to struggle against Tony and
rammed its armor-clad elbow into his mask.
Tony stumbled back a step - these fuckers had a hell of a lot of power - and shook his spinning
head before reaching out with his arm to blast a repulser beam at his ugly opponent.

As the blast went off a brute force slammed into him from the side, sending his beam astray.

His target let out a pained scream, his beam having scorched it, and Tony was hurled a few feet to
the side by the thing that had slammed into him. The impact caused the metal covering his
midsection to bend inward, squashing his bones, muscles, and stomach.
With a pained gasp, he landed on his back, catching sight of the other Chitauri-soldier he had
foolishly ignored before.

Now it was standing there, its gigantic alien sledgehammer raised, evidently the thing which had
hit Tony a second before - how could he have not seen that?!

With a whirling movement, the Chitauri lunged out to smash the laying Iron Man with its weapon.

Again, only Tony's reflexes rescued him when he yanked up his arm and fired his repulsor. The
alien was flung through the air, and Tony took the moment of peace to get back on his feet,
clenching his teeth together in an attempt to endure the pain in his abdomen.

Seriously pissed off by now and fueled by the knowledge that his chances were getting worse with
every minute he let go by, Tony told Jarvis to start the Bren gun and fired almost aimlessly at the
Chitauri, perforating his walls and furniture more than actually hitting his enemies.
When his ammo was spent, it became very quiet.

The sound of his heavy breathing was drowned out by the pounding of blood in his ears - he had the bad feeling that he had a concussion - and when he let his arm fall down again, he felt the floor wavering dangerously under his feet.

Having his last reserves, even more than his last reserves, exhausted, he staggered sideways and had to lean against the wall.

Tony's vision blurred and he squinted his eyes, breathing a quiet "Fuck!" and trying to regain control again while ignoring the pain. He heard a high-pitched scream from above, quickly followed by an agonized yell.

"Loki," he realized, and a rush of panic made his stomach turn: There were even more of them - and they were killing Loki.

It was only a matter of time before they came down here.

He was so fucking dead.

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Loki barely had time to draw his last six knives as the Chitauri advanced on him, weapons pointed at him threateningly.

One of the small knives was sent flying, a nearly automatic, but perfect, movement, aimed at the narrow eye-hole in one of the beast's helmets.

The sharp metal went right through it, deep into the alien's eye and through to its skull.

The Chitauri fell with a strangled cry, stumbling forward and was already dead when it hit the floor with a thud, dark-purple blood streaming out of the lethal wound in its head.

There was no time for Loki to celebrate his victory, he just watched as the remaining Chitauri circled him, trapping him in their midst.

A second too late, he realized that he had been cornered, but exhaustion was claiming its tribute.

There was only a small chance of survival, even less of a chance to escape, but his Asgardian's pride did not allow him to give up.

Rather he would fight until all his power was drained and only then would these creatures be able to get a hold on him, only then would they be able to drag him away to a slow and agonizing death.

Now several Chitauri were attacking at the same time.

When Loki dodged the attack of one enemy, a spear was drilled right into his back from another one, and then a second into his shoulder. Driven by the pain, the Asgardian desperately attacked the single Chitauri in front of him and rammed one of his knives right into its neck.

Breath going ragged, eyes darting from one enemy to another, Loki felt like one of the wild beasts he and Thor use to hunt back on Asgard. He was cornered, desperate, dangerous, but above all: sentenced to certain death.

Dark blood splashed from the carotid cut of his second kill and the death of one of their comrades fueled the beasts' wrath even more, making them scream in anger.

Black claws grabbed Loki, digging into his neck, arms, shoulders, and waist. They held him tightly, giving him no chance to fight back or flee. With a violent movement the struggling god was turned around, and he witnessed a flash of blue light - a long blade of energy, attached to one of the Chitauri's arms - right before it was driven into his abdomen with brute force.
Pain like liquid fire shot up his spine and Loki cried out in agony, the sound soon fading into a
desperate whimper.

When the Chitauri threw his limp body down, the floor was already covered in his own blood,
soaking his clothes and besmearing his hands.

"You see what happens to those that try to trick us, godling," one of the beasts growled in their
guttural language, and Loki simply stared up at it, wordless, his vision already starting to blur from
blood loss.

It was over.

There was no one that would save him here.

Still, when he died, he would drag these things down with him.

The god reached for the last sherds of his magic, collected it from every corner of his wrecked
body, gathered it in his fingertips. Then he released everything in a single burst of energy, letting the magic completely slip out of
control and erupt freely in all directions.

For the moiety of a second, the room was illuminated by a blinding flash of white light, followed
by immense heat and a racing firestorm, everything drowning in the inferno of the god's released magic.
The heat was gone as fast as it had come, giving Loki the pleasure of being at least able to observe
the results of his attack:

The furniture had caught fire and the walls and floor were partially melted around him, leaving
only the god unharmed from the heat in its center. The Chitauri were nothing more than charred bones on the floor, barely recognizable as something
that had once been alive.

No, not all of the Chitauri were dead.

Three were left, protected by forcefields and merely pushed back to the other end of the room by the sheer impact of the explosion. They were soon approaching the dying god, snarling and
exposing their sharp teeth in anger, pointing their spears and blades at him for a last deadly strike.

Loki laughed, hoarse and manic, sounding more hysterical than amused. The motion spat the blood
coming from his mouth all over his chin, and it dripped down onto his already soaked armor.

The realization that he was about to die hit Loki like one of Thor's lightnings - it was a fact that
could not be altered, no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, and a feeling of utter
helplessness he had felt so often before began to consume him.

He would die now.

Then the Chitauri closest to him was hit by something huge - Loki only witnessed a blur of blue
and red - and fell to the ground, dead, with its helmet, as well as the underlying head, deformed by
the massive impact. The two remaining beast screeched angrily, but they soon shared the same fate as their comrade - killed by a large flying object that crushed their skulls with a loud, cracking noise.

Loki felt his mind slowing down, already unable to comprehend what was happening. His vision
began to darken, the corners of his eyes filling slowly with black and there was a throbbing
sensation in his abdomen, blood flowing from every wound on his body.

Over the incipient noise in his ears he heard distant footsteps, someone saying his name, and the smell of burned fabric stung his nose as a person walked over the hot ground. He knew that voice, but could not quite recall who it belonged to...

A face appeared in his field of vision and Loki was blinking in an helpless attempt to clear his eyesight, when all of a sudden there were hands on his stomach, tearing away the clothing. Immense pressure and pain broke through the numbness that had spread through his body and Loki screamed. His muscles tensed in agony and his arms shot up in a desperate attempt to free himself from the thing above him. But finally, with a voice still shouting his name, blackness swallowed him up into merciful unconsciousness.

"Tony!!"

Just before panic overtook his whole system, the sound of his name yelled by a familiar voice ripped Tony out of his rushing thoughts. What on earth was Steve doing here?!

"TONY!"

It took a moment for Tony's body to catch up with his mind, but when it did he hurriedly took off his helmet, answering with a hoarse, but audible "Yeah! I'm down here!"

Maybe there was some hope after all.

Whatever he was doing here, Rogers would kick these Chitauri asses with ease. He was healthy, and fit, and most of all - sober. Pulling himself together, the billionaire started walking towards the stairs, hissing in pain at every step.

"I killed them. Is everything alright?!"

Steve's voice had never sounded so welcome to him in his life. If he did not feel like he was about to faint, Tony would have gone in for a smooch.

"Uh-huh," was his answer instead. Real answers and real sentences were hard, as was trying to figure out how the fuck he was going to get upstairs.

"They injured Loki pretty bad, can you call an amb-"

Steve's last word was drowned out by the loud clattering of metal meeting cement. Tony's legs had finally conked out and made him tumble to the floor again with unstopped force.

"Ambulance will arrive in approximately five minutes, Sir," , Jarvis announced and Tony decided to simply never get up again and just lie there until this was all over.

"Let me help you to get out of this."

As always, Steve was of another opinion.

Tony watched, out of the corner of his eye, Steve take up a wrench from the dusty floor and hurry over to him. He began loosening the single screws and undo the metallic plates, the hand work making it a long and tiring procedure.
Tony had showed the soldier how to do it over half a year ago, after the battle of New York. They had just begun working together as an official team and the engineer had insisted on teaching Steve how to manually remove the Iron Man armor from his body, in case the robots would not work and there was an urgent need to get Tony out of the thing.

Oh, how right he had been with his intuition!

To his great approval, Steve did his work in silence, only interrupted by Tony's small hisses of pain and the roaring of an approaching helicopter from outside. Even though the super soldier did not comment on it, the way he wrinkled his nose was enough to tell Tony that he had noticed his state of drunkenness.

He would come back on it later, that much was clear.

"Looks bad, huh?", Tony muttered and groaned in pain when Steve removed the heavy chest-piece to reveal what the inventor feared was several broken rips.

"Yeah," his teammate answered, then he mumbled something about large internal bleeding while he removed the blood-soaked shirt. The skin at the spot of impact – Tony saw the super soldier shooting a quick glance to the glowing Chitauri-hammer that was only a few feet away from their current position - was colored a deep red and violet that spread even further than the actual injury.

"Oh, dear. Don't move Tony, I'll...oh-"

Before Steve could finish his sentence, two medics appeared on the top of the stairs and hurried towards them. They knelt at Tonys' sides, the inventor now fully freed of his armor, and started unpacking their first aid supplies.

When he saw that he was no longer needed, Steve rose to his feet and shot Tony a small, reassuring smile, before his face turned serious again.

"I will be upstairs."

With quick, focussed steps he was gone, leaving Tony in the hands of the paramedics. The two men did their job without unnecessary talking. As soon as they saw that there was no immediate danger to his life, they offered support to help him get to the helicopter waiting outside without having to be carried on a litter.

Far from being graceful, he managed to get up on his feet (with a little help, or more than a little help, from four strong arms), and he started up the stairs, swaying and supported by both doctors, but at least walking on his own two feet.

He only got a short look at what had happened to what had once been his living room, but what he saw was, even in his dazed and pain hazed state, horrible.

Nothing was left but ash, deformed furniture, and molten walls covered in layers of disgusting slag and soot.

Three S.H.I.E.L.D agents were rummaging through the totally destroyed living room, already picking up samples from the killed Chitauri. Steve and three other medics were bent over a body lying on the ground, the only body which was not a piece of ash.

The god seemed to be worse off than Tony himself.

Not even conscious, Loki was lying on the floor without any visible movement and Tony needed a few seconds to realize that everything, the whole large puddle around him, was his own blood.
Somehow, the thought that the god would die in his house, under these circumstances and with Tony only a few yards away, deeply disturbed him. It did not fit in the picture. However, everything had stopped fitting in the picture of how the world was suppose to turn months ago.

Was an enemy, fighting the same enemy as oneself, still considered an enemy?

Or had he simply grown tired of seeing people die?

Tony was grateful that his mind eventually started drifting off when he was escorted to the helicopters. Only absentmindedly did he noticed how the paramedics in the hovering helicopter gave him first aid and stabilized him, putting him on banked blood and nutrient fluid, and eventually gave him a morphine injection.

The flight went by without him noticing, like he had closed his eyes only for a second to dispel the burning and was in the hospital when he opened them again.

After he had successfully sullied the hospital bed they brought him in with his blood and vomit – as if his body had waited for the panic to go by, he felt nausea overwhelm him as soon as he was laid down on something comfortable – they imposed an emergency operation immediately.

He wondered for a second what the hell they would do with Loki, but the thought drowned in the voices, the bright lights around him, and the pain as soon as it had appeared.

The last thing he remembered in the whole blurred chain of events, was how the oxygen mask was firmly pressed on his face, then the anesthetics began to work.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment and don't forget to give a kudos! :D

Thanks again to out great beta Yue1234.
At first, unconsciousness was a relief.

It came as liberation, the final silencing of his wrecked brain and all its chaotic, panicked thoughts; it drained away all the fear and desperation, and the devouring pain and exhaustion of his body.

Yet, when Loki drifted closer and closer to the surface of awakening, all these emotions came back with unbearable intensity and, even before he regained full consciousness, his thoughts were raging again.

He had to return to Asgard immediately.

He had to see Thor.

He had to find a way to destroy the Chitauri, and Thanos with them.

But first, he had to run, because they were coming for him, they would take him and make him endure unbearable pain, agony beyond his imagination. They would take Thor too, their hunger for death forever unsatisfied, and would slaughter him in front of him, would-

Loki awoke with a flinch.

In the same instant his eyes opened, he tried to get up, to get away, to run and hide. Yet, a clattering sound and a sudden painful sensation around his wrists told him he was in chains – escape impossible.

Thick metal bracelets were around both of his wrists – made out of a metal far more resistant than any common steel - and connected to something else which held his hands in place so he could not move them. There was also something covering his mouth and nose, pressing against his skin, and no matter how much he moved his head or tried to rub the side of his face against the mattress, he could not get it off.

As if that had not been enough, Loki discovered that when he moved his right arm against the chains, he could see that there were needles sticking into the crook of his arm, connected to tubes that held liquids unknown to him, dripping directly into his veins.

And, there was pain.

Pain everywhere in his body: his back, his legs, his abdomen, his head, torturing him from deep within his bones without a possibility of escaping it. He was trapped, defenseless, and completely at the mercy of his captors.
Again, Loki struggled against the chains, against the mattress he was lying on, and against the thing on his face that was sucking the air out of him, but it was a lost cause. Eventually he surrendered and his whole body went limp, except for occasional shivers from pain and exhaustion.

A few minutes after his struggling had ceased, Loki slowly drifted back into a half-awake, feverish sleep, filled with nightmares and fear, though more distant and vague than before.

It sounded crazy if one thought about it now, but the last time he had actually slept had been back in Asgard.
His cell had not been overly comfortable, yet the Aesir had allowed him the simplest of comforts, like a bed, a desk, and his own bathroom.

It had been mortifyingly boring, but, compared to his current condition, it had felt like paradise. And then, all of a sudden, there was a voice.

"Loki?"

It was distant at first, but strangely familiar. He soon felt the presence of someone beside him, and hear the scraping of metal over uncarpeted floor.

"Are you awake?"

Loki opened his eyes, squinting around.
He could make out a broad frame, a blur of blond hair, and blue eyes hovering above him, but it was not easy to make out much more.
The light was blinding him.

"Thor?", the god asked weakly, his voice not much more than a whisper. It was the first name that came into his mind.
He blinked a few times and slowly, his vision cleared until the blurred outlines became an actual person.

Loki felt deeply disappointed as it became obvious that it was not Thor present at his bedside, but merely one of those mortals.

"No, you are not Thor - you are the soldier."

The god firmly closed his tired eyes and swallowed hard.
Fate was indeed cruel, delivering him right into the arms of his enemies, at their total mercy. Some vague voice in Loki's mind told him that Rogers would not harm him, he remembered this man to be described as a being with particularly high morals in that group of so called heroes.

He should be grateful that it was the Captain standing over him and not Barton or the Widow, but he could not get himself to muster this gratefulness, not with his hands in chains and his body in shreds.
Yet, who knew, maybe this mortal hid more behind his kind face and good reputation than someone might suspect.

"I wish you had come just a minute later... it would have spared me this."

His eyes opened again, letting his gaze travel over the supersoldier's figure, which did not look as impressive in his plain clothing as back in battle, then eventually down to have a look at his own body.
Loki was naked, except for a white blanket pulled up to his waist, his wounds were not even covered by bandages.
There was a large red scar stretching from the middle of his lower abdomen almost up to his ribcage, where the healers had put his intestines back into place, tightly closed by thick threats. Yellowish fluid was leaking from the edges of the wound, indicating a lack of proper healing.

Loki could not see, but could feel his other wounds: the large stab wounds from the spears in his back, deep cuts in his arms and legs, several broken rips, a broken wrist, and a badly infected wound on his right shoulder, where a Chitauri had actually bitten off a chuck of Loki’s flesh and exposed an awful lot of the bone beneath.

Everything hurt.

"Get these things off me. I have to return to Asgard," Loki demanded, now louder than before and more determined, rattling his chains.

He knew he was in too bad a condition to think of leaving the bed, he was not even sure whether his body held enough strength to sit up, but it was the only action that would give his miserable existence back some of its worth. He would not wait here, chained to the bed like a wild beast, until one of the mortals came to carry him away into a dark pit where he could rot until his body completely refused to work.

"If you won't do it, I will break my hands and do it myself."

"You won't be going anywhere soon, Loki, you can be happy you're still alive," the human finally answered with neither hostility nor friendliness in his voice, only a tired expression on his face.

Loki watched him step back from the bed and sink into the provided chair, inadvertently letting out a small sigh of exhaustion.

"I don't know to what extent you are able or willing to give information, but to be honest, that doesn't really matter to me right now."

Loki did not give an answer to the subtle thread, only stared at the blond man beside his bed. He would not talk to this man, not until he got rid of the shackles.

"Is there any possibility that your presence will attract more Chitauri? This is just practical, we will double our forces then."

The Captain waited for the answer, clenching his jaw when Loki only had a embittered chuckle for him in return.

"Another thing, after which I'll leave you alone. What did you want from Tony?"

Loki turned his head around to face the wall at the other side of his bed, focusing on examining its pattern and thereby underlining the fact that he would not speak. He heard footsteps and the broad frame of Rogers reappeared in his field of vision. Despite his anticipations, the mortal did not look down at him first, but fiddled with one of the tubes.

"The pain should get better soon."

Loki wondered how the mortal had noticed his state. The god did not remember making pained noises, nor flinching from a sudden, unpleasant movement. Maybe the supersoldier had seen it in his expression, or it was nothing but a random assumption, given the circumstances he found himself in.
"So, again: What was it you wanted from Tony?"

"Nothing you need to know about, because you can not provide me with what I came to ask for."

Loki tried to move his hands a little and pulled at the chains, growling in frustrated when it became obvious to him that he did not posses the strength to make his threat of breaking his hands come true.

"I would advise you to let me go. More Chitauri will come to kill me, there are always more. I've killed thousands of them since I left Asgard, but there were always new ones. Always. Do you truly think your pathetic forces could keep them at bay? If Asgard has fallen to their forces, what hope do you have to survive?"

Loki pulled anew on his restraints, this time putting more strength into it. His desire to move, to leave this place and flee, grew with every second he gained more of his consciousness. He put all his power in the movement, but what would have been an easy task in a healthy state, was impossible to him now and did nothing more than cause his broken wrist to hurt awfully.

Nevertheless Loki did not stop, making the metal constructions beside the bed creak loudly.

"If you value your people, you will let me go and I shall never be seen again."

"We won't let you go until there's no way to hold you here any longer. Your arrival is the first hint on what's going on in the universe since the attack. There's a complete lack of communication with Asgard; we just sit here, rebuilding what has been destroyed as best as we can, waiting for another fatal attack. I'll be honest with you - we are in the limbo."

This comment was followed by a few seconds of silence, in which both men were staring at each other, one at the loss of words, the other simply refusing to speak.

"I'm going to leave now. There will be a nurse here soon, who'll give you some tranquilizer. Get some rest, I will come back tomorrow and I hope for your sake that you are willing to talk to me then. I doubt you want the Chitauri to attack while you're tied to the bed, not even able to lift your arm."

With that the man walked around the bed and out of the room without throwing Loki another glance.

"No, you won't leave without getting these chains off me!"

Loki screamed after the soldier, panicking, but also radiating anger as his voice took on a volume his body struggled to produce.

"Get back here, you useless human!!"

Nevertheless, the soldier was gone.

The god uttered another frustrated, even louder scream and pulled at his chains, tossing around in the bed angrily and ignoring the fact that his wound had started bleeding again.

Damn!

These mortals had no right to hold him in this place, not to mention chain him up like a beast that would claw out their throats at the first opportunity!
Loki's anger had not ceased even minutes later, when a woman entered the room, dressed in a white, plain uniform and displaying a nervous, hectic behavior. She didn't talk to Loki, nor look him directly in the face when she approached him. She merely wiped off the blood from his stomach and added something to the tube attached to his arm without a single word of explanation and with as little physical contact as possible.

"What are you giving to me?", Loki asked, a hint of panic mixing in his voice. He stared at the tube, moving his arm again to get the needle out of his skin without success.

"Pull it out, I don't want your poison! Pull it out I said, and get these damned chains off me!"

The woman fled the room and once again Loki was left alone, forced to lie motionlessly on his back. It felt strange and wrong when Loki found himself calming down after a few minutes of loneliness, because he knew that there were still plenty of reasons to be furious, reasons to worry, reasons which had prevented him from sleeping the last few weeks.

Nevertheless, his thoughts became heavier and slower with every minute and after he realized it was futile, he stopped fighting against it.

It was a relief when finally all of his thoughts were wiped off his mind, and the mortal's artificial sleep allowed him to drift away into the nothingness of an exhausted slumber.

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When he awoke his head, his body, and even his tongue felt fluffy, like cotton wool. He was not exactly sure if he liked the feeling, but he had no idea what to do about it.

The first thing Tony Stark's gaze met was a bright, welcoming wall with huge windows that were positioned to give an amazing overview of huge gardens that, while kept in excellent condition, did not quite fit Malibu's climate. The second thing he saw, when he let his eyes wander to the other side of his room, was a blonde head with blue eyes under sorrowful knitted brows, looking at him like his nanny had always looked back with when he had had a bike crash as a boy or later, when he had fallen out of a window at a party in his jag.

"The hell 'r ya doin' 'ere?", Tony mumbled, not exactly able of coherent speech.

Slowly his brain started recollecting what had happened: Loki's visit, the Chitauri who had followed him, lots of blood, broken furniture and pain. He could feel an immense pain in his abdomen, and his lack of a hangover went unregistered when he felt a burning sensation shoot through his shoulder.

He grimaced, images of the Chitauri attack flashing through his head.

"What has happened… since you, uh, came out of nowhere like a fucking superhero?"

He always quarreled with the little word 'Thanks', but calling Steve a hero was the closest he could get at the moment.

"The S.H.I.E.L.D facility in L.A picked up a disturbance in your house, similar to the ones created by the Tesseract. They were not entirely sure if it was a threat, since you know… it is your house, but they send me over to be sure. Luckily, I just arrived to see Loki burned most of the Chitauri with a fire blast, but he nearly got killed by the surviving ones, which I had to take care of."
I guess it can wait a few minutes, but, uhm, you have to tell me what happened before I arrived. Fury is already climbing the walls because of that incidence."

Steve broke eye-contact with Tony and stroked through his messy and dust covered hair. It was so typical for him, coming here first instead of cleaning or redressing himself, but at least he had got rid of his blood-soaked gloves.
The supersoldier took a deep breath and raised his gaze again, looking into Tony's eyes and suddenly, a relieved smile spread over his face.

Seemingly, somebody had been really bothered.

The corner of Tony's mouth twitched in an answering smile, but he was a bit absent-minded, he hardly noticed what was going on inside Steve.

He tried focusing on what Steve had said about Fury. The SHIELD-director was halfway around the world right now, so far away he did not feel like 'the realest person he was ever gonna meet' at all.
The man had been a mere memory for him throughout the last weeks, although a detailed and not entirely positive connotated one, and he could not quite grasp the thought that he was still holding him accountability in some way.

It was partly Fury's fault how the events had developed, since it turned out that he had been more than over-challenged when the Chitauri had attacked a second time. SHIELDs collapse, the breakdown of one of the largest intelligence agencies of the world, could undoubtedly be called historical and it was a bad sign for SHIELD that they had kept Fury and not had him fired.

Tony raised his hand, grimaced at the ache in his shoulder, and quickly used the other one to run his fingers through his messy hair, still staring at the gardens outside his window.
Only when Steve insisted that he should at least give him a brief summary did he turned around, a bit pissed-off.

"I'm not working for Fury”, was all he said.

The longer he was awake, the more he felt that he was sober, frigging dead sober and that pain killers only killed physical pain, and did not help in blurring memories and lifting one's mood.
It was a more than uncomfortable experience to be torn out of his sleepwalking by brute force, pulled into broad daylight, and confronted with things he had thought he was finished with once and for all.

Although it was irrational, he felt the strong urge to simply disobey and withhold the information SHIELD wanted - they were unworthy of it anyways. Without much thinking, he came up with lots of reasons they should not know that Loki had the Tesseract with him...

"He came in 'n threatened me, but he was...mh...weakened. Injured. Yet, I was, too,”, the billionaire started lying, rubbing his hand over his mouth while he talked, his unshaved cheeks rough under his fingers.
He did not know exactly why he was telling this story. Maybe he wanted to score off Fury, maybe the sight of Loki's blood-soaked body had triggered something like empathy, but probably he was just desperate to regain some control over things again.

And now that he was sober, he actually managed to do so.

"The Chitauri came in shortly after he arrived, I think they were lookin' for him 'cause they're unforgiving little fucks. They said something, I don't know, I don't speak Alien."
"Loki just walked in and threatened you when he was weakened? You know that doesn't make any sense, right?"

Okay, obviously Steve's nerve-wrecking ability to see through Tony's lies had not suffered from their lack of personal contact throughout the last few months. The billionaire pressed his lips together and refused to answer, his eyes hard and distant, focused on something outside.

"You know Tony, if it is something important, you have to tell me. If you don't want Fury to know, then it is okay. Our friendship means more to me than SHIELD. You know I don't approve of everything they do, but please, don't hide anything from me that could be important to us. I know that look on your face."

Steve gave him a faint and not entirely happy smile.

Tony clenched his jaws, but remained silent, cursing the supersoldier for being such an incorruptible little pain in the ass.

"Damnit, Tony! I thought I was gonna lose you, too."

The sudden rush of emotion in Steve's voice startled him, and he did not foresee the upcoming hug and therefore had no chance of stopping it. His teammate hugged him tightly, but still gentle - good Captain Rogers, always aware of his incredible strength and the fragility of a mere human's wounded body.

Tony widened his eyes in surprise and wanted to complain, but somehow he decided differently and shut his mouth again.

Pressing his lips together tightly, the inventor just stared at the opposite wall, not letting any tension ease from his body.

This hug was more physical contact than he had had in months and the fear of what might happen if he allowed himself to admit he had really, really needed that or worse. that it actually caused a warm, choking feeling in his chest, was too much.

So, he simply remained in his frozen position until Steve let go of him. Both men shared an extensive look when the supersoldier sat back again, his position slightly stressed now, as if he was on the run.

Yeah, Tony bet Steve was running the show here, at least he looked like it with his exhausted features and dusty clothing.

"Look, Tony, you know you can trust me. Take your time to think about it, I will be back this evening."

His words were serious again, although still soft from the former rush of emotions.

He threw the billionaire a quick smile, then rose from his chair and walked towards the door, closing it with a last quick glance at the man in the bed.

------------------------------------------

Next time Loki awoke, it was not from a sudden panic attack, but from a throbbing feeling in his abdomen and an almost painful itching around the edges of his large wound.

When he observed it to find the cause for the unpleasant itch, he quickly realized there had to be something seriously wrong.

The wound in his abdomen looked worse, far worse than a couple of hours ago. Its edges were of a burning red color and the amount of purulence had increased from a few drops to a constant flow of
yellowish liquid, dripping down his side and already starting to dampen the mattress.

He was not only severely wounded, but as it seemed he had also caught himself a nasty infection from a Chitauri.

Loki doubted that the human's had any idea how to deal with such diseases, though admittedly, he did neither.
However, that still did not mean he had to stay.

The god lay for a few minutes in silence, trying to listen to any movement or voices outside the dark room, but there were none. Complete silence, except for the low hum of the machines around.

Good, if they had decided to forget him, he could use that to his advantage.

Due to the few hours of rest, most of his panic had vanished and allowed the calculating part of Loki’s brain to do its work again.
The aim, however, was still the same: He had to get out of this room – but first, he had to get rid of the chains.

Loki reached for his magic, hoping that it might be restored to some amount, but he only found a little of it available, hidden away far beneath his skin.
The god had the faint suspicion that he should actually keep it for the regeneration process, but the attempt of an escape was just too tempting.

Hopefully, it would be enough for one simple spell.

The god let the little magic energy he could muster seep into the metal, where it rearranged the structure, turning the once solid mass of metal into an unstable and brittle trifle of a barrier. With one strong, quick pull of both arms the chains were, including the bracelets around his wrists, ripped apart and thrown to the ground.

At least some success was granted to him.

The first thing Loki did with his regained mobility was pull the needle out of his arm, seconds later he wiped off the fluid from his stomach with the blanket. His whole body felt dirty and disgusting, longing for a bath, but hygiene was of secondary importance right now.
He needed to get away from here, before the mortals noticed his escape.

It took all of his willpower and strength to sit up and his whole chest was burning from the pain, as the damaged muscles in his abdomen were forced to work and the threads were pulling at the tensed skin.
Finally in a sitting position, the room swayed dangerously around him and white spots flashed in his vision, but Loki shrugged the feeling off and went forward, ignoring the protests of his body.

Carefully, he shoved his legs out of the bed, letting his feed touch the ground. He gingerly put his weight on them and - he barely stood longer than a second, then his legs gave put, as if they were boneless.

In the next moment Loki found himself on the ground.

The Captain had been right: he was not going anywhere soon, not in his current condition.
A few tears of frustration and shame blurred his vision as he felt fresh blood leaking from his wound and the god realized that he did not only lack the ability to escape this place, but that he could not even return to the bed on his own.
He was forced to lie on the floor like a helpless toddler, until somebody returned in the morning and showed him the mercy of helping him back into his bed, just to chain him anew. With one trembling hand, Loki reached up to the bed and grabbed the blanket, pulling it down to the floor and tugging himself into it to cover his naked body.

The remainder of the night was agonizing and Loki could barely sleep on the hard, cold floor. He drifted away into uneasy dozes a couple of times, but these never lasted more than a few minutes and the feverish half-awake sleep made him feel even worse.

In the early hours of morning, the room was finally entered by one of the white-clad women. Yet, when she saw him out of the bed and, more important, without his chains, she did not make any attempts to help the wounded god, but rushed out of the room immediately.

It took her mere seconds to assemble two armed soldiers, running into the room and pointing their weapons at Loki. They screamed at him, demanding him to stand against the wall and raise his hands above his head.

However, as the god refused to obey and stayed sitting in the corner beside his bed with the blanket draped firmly around his frame, they did not dare to approach him. The humans were still afraid of him, even in that weakened state.

The thought gave him a little bit of satisfaction.

"Damn, get Rogers here! I am definitely not going to touch him", Loki heard one of the soldiers bark at his colleague, before the second one talked into a small device attached to his ear.

Both weapons were still pointed at his forehead.

A couple of minutes later, Rogers entered the room with energetic steps. The soldiers jumped out of his way and then gathered behind him like scared housewives; keeping their expressions blank and guns raised.

"Is this your attempt at killing yourself as painfully and as slowly as possible?", the blonde asked when he got down besides Loki, picking him up in a firm, but sensitive grip. He was careful to avoid touching the god's injuries as he settled him down on the bed, Loki trying to hold in hisses of pain.

"Because it isn't working," Rogers added, tossing the blanket away and forcing a yelp out of Loki. He got their prisoner a new one, eagerly waving his hand at a nurse to make her come closer. The soldiers were still staring at him, a bit dumb-founded.

"Get a doctor, the wound has opened again and looks infected. And bring chains and shackles, new ones. Better ones."

Nurses hurried around Loki's bed, all of them avoiding eye-contact and trying to get their job done as quickly as possible.

"No, no chains again - but I would appreciate clothing", Loki insisted in a sore tone, covering himself with the new blanket

The thought reminded him of something and he looked around, searching for something important, vital for all further action outside of this bed.

"Where is my armor? I need it. Get it back to me, immediate- no, not the chains! I will stay in the bed, I promise, but keep those things off me!"
Panic flooded through his body the second he saw the new chains delivered and Loki pressed his hands tightly to his body to avoid someone getting hold of his wrists.

It was pathetic: There he was, reduced to begging for a mortal’s mercy.

Still, the idea of being bound again caused nothing but fear in him, was even worse than the shame and the humiliation, because Loki knew fully well that he had not the slightest chance of fighting off the Captain in his current state.

His fate was no longer in his own hands, something he had experienced before, yet had never caused him so much distress.

What was making the god so nervous was that he doubted he could muster the strength to break the chains a second time. The small amount of magic that had restored over the hours was almost drained again from its use, and his health was nothing more than pitiful, his body weakened and his muscles protesting against any movement.

Also, with that badly of an infected wound sucking all his energy out of his body, the future looked grim to him.

Maybe the mortals would also shackle his ankles and put back that awful tube on his face, just to be sure this time...

Instinctively, Loki pulled his legs closer to his body and wrapped the blanket tightly around himself, using the thick fabric to protect his limbs.

"Just leave me alone."

The last words were nothing but a whisper, barely audible through the surrounding noise. Nurses and soldiers had left to obey Rogers' demands, leaving the supersoldier alone with the power to decide the fate of the defenseless god before him.

The man let out a short sigh and Loki saw something akin to empathy, even pity, in the other's face.

That sight made him cease his small whimpers immediately.

"Loki, if you agree to cooperate on at least the most basic levels, than the doctors will help you ease the pain and get back to health soon. Unfortunately for you, this calls for chains and surveillance, so stop acting self-destructive and give me your arm. Now."

"Here, Sir."

The soldiers had returned, bringing thick leather cuffs, reinforced with metal, and shackles too, just in case.

"Your wrists, Loki. I will use force if you don't cooperate."

Loki did not cooperate and so Rogers had to make his threat come true. Breaking the god's resistance was ridiculously easy for the supersoldier and it made Loki realize even further how bad his condition actually was.

Nevertheless, it did not keep him from insulting the man with every word that came into his mind all the while he was forcefully chaining him to the bed's metal again. It was the only defense left to him and he would exploit it to the fullest.
Yet, the human did not even pay attention to him any more and was talking to the two soldiers and the medics who had arrived.

"The wound has been reopened and appears to be infected," Rogers repeated to them as they just stood there and stared at Loki.

"As we don't know what it is, we should think about quarantine. It's alien and probably contagious."

The men hesitated and threw weary glances at the god on the bed.

None of them seemed to be experienced with this kind of patient, the only things they knew about Loki probably came from what they had heard about the Chitauri attack.

Those naive, hysterical mortals, always in a state of fear which dazed their common sense and made them blind towards the fact that even gods could be tamed by the right amount of pain.

"Damnit, get him into surgery and find out what the Chitauri have infected him with! We need him alive! You don't want to have the loss of such an important prisoner on your shoulders, do you? He may have valuable information without which we probably won't survive another Chitauri attack, so do your job for once!"

Only when the supersoldier raised his voice did there come movement. The medics and soldiers scrambled to the god's side, silencing him with another injection.

Chapter End Notes

   Thanks for reading and don't forget the kudos :D
Recovery

Chapter Summary

We are sorry for the delay, it was actually intended to upload regularly :/
Hopefully, there will be one update every week for this fanfiction from now on. We will try our best :D

A polite, determined knocking, then the door opened.
Act 3452, Scene 27993 of the miserable life of Tony Stark, enter Colonel James Rhodes, old friend and nerve-wrecking voice of reason.

Rhodey had probably been waiting for this – he had told Tony often enough that he was constantly waiting for Tony to end up in a hospital, what with the breakneck pace Tony ran his life at. The Colonel expected to get a call one day, telling him that his friend was having an emergency operation, serious injuries, or even worse, had finally died.

Nevertheless, Rhodey seemed deeply concerned when he first saw Tony. Despite his high military position, James had never received any detailed summary about what had happened during the attack on New York and Tony had provided him with close to zero information.

So, if they had told him about the aliens included this time, he probably had assumed the worst. Yet, when the soldier saw his friend alive and well – sort of – a smile spread on his face, soon morphing in a full out grin and he gave his mate a pat on his shoulder before sitting down on the edge of his bed.

"Damn, Tony. One day I will go into cardiac arrest because of your bullshit."
Tony gave his friend a lopsided smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He really wanted to be left alone, and he really did not want to make his mate endure his gloomy mood again.

Moreover, having Rhodey around was beyond exhausting. The man was a real epitome of good will and consistency and always interfered with the inventor's flippant ideas and actions.

Rhodey and Steve were alike in many ways and Tony had started wondering if it was more than a coincidence that the only people still caring for him were correct, morally steadfast soldiers. The thought that he had successfully driven away everyone else who was not blessed - or cursed - with military discipline and perseverance was a bit frightening, yet it gave him a grim satisfaction.

"It's not even my fault this time,” Tony answered, keeping up his smiling masquerade with the last remaining bits of his strength. But it didn't matter how wide he stretched his smile, because he looked like he had been fucked all over anyway. For a second, his smile turned into an almost pained grimace, before he let it fade away completely, avoiding his friend's gaze and staring at his blanket instead.

Rhodey's smile ceased and he let out a quick sigh, patting Tony's arm again in a gesture of genuine empathy.
“From what I've heard, you weren't exactly in prime condition to kick ass when you were attacked, that's unlike you.”
It was almost endearing how Rhodey still tiptoed around hard words, even though Tony remembered being yelled at, grabbed by his arms and shaken by him, he even remembered thrown bottles, but those memories were only torn fragments of the blurred visions from last months and he could not quite bring them into line.

The billionaire observed his hands, closing and opening his fingers to fists and listened to the dull, throbbing pain of his pulse in his temples, indicating the beginning of a migraine-attack he'd rather like to avoid.

"Would you get me something for my headache?"

He really did not want to have that kind of conversation again, he knew his friend was right, but he knew also that he had no fucking clue what he was talking about when he offered Tony advice.

Rhodey's eyebrows rose, skepticism written all over his face, "Tony, the doctors said you are already at the limit of the tolerable dosage for your condition. It is probably psycho-somatic anyh-"

"Yeah, I get it, I get it," the billionaire put him off before he could even start his monologue on how Tony needed a good psychiatrist, not booze or pills. He was getting tired of this.

"I suppose you're here to affirm your already passed judgements on me and get some hot news on aliens, am I right?"

God, it was not fair, not fair at all to snap at Rhodey like that. The Colonel only meant well, the engineer knew that, but it was almost impossible for him to keep all his stored up bitterness in check. It leaked out on any end possible, dripping from his words like poison even when he spoke to people he considered his closest friends.

"Man, Tony, no. I'm just worried. You've been seriously injured and I worry – that is what friends do, you know?"

James let out a sigh which told more than his words did about how tiring it was for him to deal with Tony's reactions.

"Yeah, sure."

Normally, Tony would've assured Rhodey in this moment, told him that he was fine and his mate was over-reacting, being the worrywart he was, but it was futile.

Tony knew that after Pepper's death, their friendship had been pushed to teetering dangerous on an edge and he knew he was the one who sabotaged every attempt for a reconciliation, but, as cruel as it may sounded, he did not give a fuck. At least, that's what he liked to think - it made it easier to forget about responsibilities.

"Okay, you care how I feel? My spirit is subzero, below ground, there's a fucking Death Metal-band rehearsing in my head, only minutes from beginning their gig with the volume and bass turned to max and I know that, if not for the morphine they've drugged me up to my eyeballs with, I would probably puke my innards out. They feed me soup and fucking baby food because of the contusion and I haven't showered for a freaking week."

The inventor's voice had stayed low, yet his tone had changed and adopted a harsh tone, almost a hiss.

"You can stop asking, Rhodey, because there's only one direction things are going."

Silence.

Rhodey had averted his gaze. His eyes were dark with untold thoughts and he looked like he hated being Tony Stark's friend right now.
"I see," he concluded suddenly, looking Tony in the eye again and from what the inventor could read from his expression, he had severely pissed him off.

"Tony, if you don't want me here, you can just tell me straight out. It's okay. And, if there is anything you need – except all kinds of drugs - just call for me. I'll visit you this weekend, if I am not tied up with business. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

Tony stayed silent, looking at Rhodey with a hard expression, waiting for him to leave. James put a hand on his shoulder again and tried to smile at his friend, who refused to return the motion. The soldier's expression faltered and he removed his hand, heading for the door.

"See ya."

When Rhodey had left the room, Tony remained motionlessly staring at his blanket for a minute. Then, in an abrupt outburst of frustration, he clenched his fists around the fabric, immediately loosening his grip again when he realized he could not do anything with it to release his inner tension and ran his hands over his face and through his hair in an erratic movement, almost shaking.

"You fucking pretentious shithead..." he mumbled mindlessly, not sure if he meant his friend or himself. He was alone again, that's what he had wanted, and it felt better, not good, but better, because now he had only his one inner law court who he was accountable to and not another exterior force.

Time revealed that he had been right about his premonition about the migraine. Within an hour, he was reduced to a light-shunning corpse, laying on his side with his back facing the bright windows, the balls of his hands pressed into his eye sockets until he saw stars.

The nurses at least had enough mercy to close the curtains for him, but it did not make it much better. His haunted thoughts were circling around the heap of bullshit which was what remained of his formerly awesome life, again and again they circled, tripping over the same sticking points. The thing was, he knew how he could stop it, not make it better, but stop the pain that was hurting like a bitch- he just couldn't.

The inventor managed to survive somehow by doing nothing but simply laying there, now and then drifting into an unsteady sleep, not even looking at the dinner they served him, until darkness settled around the hospital. With darkness came the shadows and brought with them at least some consolation.

The throbbing pain in his head always eased in the nighttime, making way for an hectic, aimless restlessness which kept him from sleeping and left him with burning eyes and a racing pulse.

Some time around 8 AM he got breakfast - he would've killed anybody appearing in his room before that hour, even with his injuries - and he started eating.

More because of boredom and as an activity to focus his thoughts on at first, but once he tasted the sweet pancakes, he actually felt the black hole which was his stomach and started stuffing his mouth with this godly plate of food.

When his door opened another time, he could only mutter a, "No" with a full mouth, but it was overheard anyway.

Seeing a freshly showered, but slightly stressed looking Steve enter his room was not entirely what
he needed right now, but the box he carried under his arm caught Tony's attention and without bothering with a welcome, he gulped down the pancake and asked:
"What's in there?"
"Good morning. It is stuff from your home. I thought maybe you'd want something to occupy yourself with."

Steve put the box onto the desk and opened it, unpacking a Stark-pad, several books, and some fresh clothing, which would replace the awful hospital garments.

"How do you feel? You know me to be an honest person and, frankly, you look awful. Maybe you should ask for some sedatives instead of morphine. The stuff is doing wonders on Loki, it's the only thing that helps keep him from reopening his wounds every ten minutes."

Steve let out an annoyed sigh and dropped onto a chair on Tony's bedside, putting the tablet on top of the small hospital cabinet. Apparently even having increased stamina did not empower someone to keep up with the pace Steve was running at.

"At least you get some nice breakfast, hmm?"
The supersoldier's gaze fell on the half-finished plate of pancakes, but Tony was already busy with something else.

"Awesome," was his only comment, he did not even make an effort to make clear what question he had just answered nor whether he meant it ironically or was serious. The plate of food was shoved aside and his fingers found the tablet, unlocking the screen with the same automatic slide of his hand as always.

Since there was no voice function on it, a message popped up right in the middle of the screen. It was from Jarvis who, activated by his specific fingerprint, told him - with his typically british stiff upper lip - he actually missed his inventor's continuous presence. It forced a small smile onto Tony's face, yet he whisked the message off and decided to lay the tablet away as well.

There were lots and lots of unfinished projects on it, most of them not even properly thought through; most were just crap he had forced his brain to think about to keep himself occupied.

They would all wander to the trash eventually, he knew it already, because, although this was the thing he refused to acknowledge himself, his unhealthy lifestyle affected his ability to work abundantly and the only thing the crap saved in his files would do was blow up in his face.

Steve had been unusually quiet while Tony was fiddling with the tablet and for a second the inventor had almost forgotten he was there. When he turned around again, he saw the supersoldier looking at the pancakes and not at him. Although he was feeling far from well, he still could conclude what that meant and without thinking twice, he handed the remaining breakfast over.

"Take it. Come on, I don't need 'em."
Of course the other protested - admittedly, it was a rather uncommon thing for Tony to actually share food, but honestly, it had lost appeal to him for a few weeks now anyway - but in the end, Steve took the plate of food, placing it in his lap and started eating like he was starving. Tony watched in silence. Real American breakfast as a real American was due.

Sobered up and almost saturated, his headache keeping quiet for now, the things Steve had said some minutes before started to actually come through to him. The billionaire knew he looked awful, and it had not even bothered him at the time that he also felt awful and completely numb, but by now, he just felt awfully tired and agitated at the same time and the longer he sat here, motionless on this damned hospital bed, the more he felt like he was rotting alive. Maybe a shower
would actually do him some good. Or a trim for his beard, since rubbing over his chin almost felt like touching Santa Claus.

"You got me, the, uh, shampoo, razor and so on?"

The delighted gleam in Steve's eyes when he looked up from his food, delighted to hear his friend actually making a request to take care of himself- at least in the most basic parts- was almost too much for Tony and made him regret his decision immediately. He could nearly see the wheels starting to turning behind the supersoldier's forehead, how he was thinking about other little, subtle steps to help his friend recover by himself.

Tony did not want to recover.
Not really, no.
He let out a deep sigh, mustering all his remaining willpower to go through with this, and sat up a little more straight. Eyeing the far away ground and sceptically scratching his head, he faltered, before he looked over to Steve again, who was momentarily getting out hygiene products out of his box.

"Steve."

The man turned around, looking so awfully attentive and ready to help it physically hurt.

"There are these sets of cables and tubes and I haven't set a foot on the floor since the attack, besides there's this annoying scratch on my ribs and, yeah..." his voice trailed off, but Steve understood without the little word 'Please' that Tony was asking for a bit of help. It was a rare sight, he knew that, and he'd loved to smack his mate in the mouth for looking so happy about it, because really, this was pathetic - usually, he'd rather trip over his ego and faceplant on the floor, but he did not trust his body like he normally would.

"Shall I get you a wheelchair?"

Hell, no! With an almost startled expression on his face, Tony waved the suggestion off.

"Wait."

Shifting a bit uneasily, Tony did as told and watched Steve put the almost emptied dish of pancakes aside and stand up, walking towards the bed. He took a firm look at the several tubes attached to Tony's arm: asodium solution, morphine and antibiotics, as well as some white nourishment.

The soldier looked at them hesitantly at first, but then closed the IV with an already prepared seal before he offered Tony a hand.

"I will get you a bath, showering doesn't seem to be an option to me."

The engineer took a second to mentally prepare, then wordlessly grasped for Steve's arm and shoved his legs out of the bed.

When he put his whole body weight onto his legs, his knees threatened to buckle like he had not used them for years and he shivered and swayed dangerously for what felt like an eternity of humiliation.

Even though he focused his gaze straight on the wall ahead to avoid meeting Steve's eyes, he could feel the disturbed stare of the man and was almost spitting some bitter sarcasm again to ease the tight knot in his guts, but he kept his mouth shut and concentrated on walking.

Steve did not hesitate for an instant and put an arm around Tony's waist, supporting his weight and giving him the option to lean against the broader frame of the soldier's body.

They slowly walked into the bathroom, taking one step after another, where Steve dropped him
onto a small chair, before he let hot water flow into the huge bathtub.

Staring at the floor with a dark expression, lips pressed tightly together to remain control over pain and exhaustion, Tony waited for Steve to fetch the necessary utensils and some clothes. When he returned, Tony was still sitting, unmoved, and only looked up from his position when he heard the supplies being dropped near the sink.

"That's all I think."

"Yeah," Tony replied simply, shooting a grudging glance towards the bathtub. Considering walking had proved to be incredibly difficult task, he had no idea how he would get in there without Steve carrying him bride-style and that was a huge, colossal No-No. However, after half a minute of clumsily trying and failing, Steve seemed to have enough of it and - without prior warning - simply lifted him from his feet and dropped him slowly into the warm water.

"I guess you can do the washing on your own...?"

"I'm not dead yet, thank you," Tony replied drily, just to regain at least a bit of his pride and finally, Steve went outside and left Tony alone.

Well, that certainly had been some of the most pathetic, humiliating minutes of his life. He was that close to just staying in his momentary position for the rest of the day and refusing to move an inch, or drown himself here and now in the hot water of the tub.

However, he actually took some of the water in his hands and let it splash into his face and over his tousled hair. The movements came almost automatically, although incredibly slow and mechanic in the beginning, but after five minutes in the steaming water, he could not fend off the calming effect any longer. Hair and body were clean by now - which felt better than he remembered - and instead of continuing, he simply laid his head on the edge of the tub and closed his eyes for a second.

When there was a concerned knock on the door and Steve's voice saying his name, he realized it had maybe been more than a few seconds.

"It's okay, I, uh, dozed off," he called, not wanting the supersoldier to come in before he was ready. The nap, although it should've done him good, had made him feel dizzy and he could already feel his headache lurking in the back of his head again.

Brilliant.

He let the tub drain itself, before he started the first attempt to get up. As expected, it did not work as easily as it should and he hated his body for it, deeply feeling a loathing for his vulnerability and weakness. It was disgusting and shameful, and all he could do was curse between clenched teeth while he tried a third time to get to his feet.

Yet, he would not call Steve again. If he had any remaining pride left, and unfortunately, he now remembered he had quite a lot of it usually, he would walk out of this room by himself.

When he actually left the damned bathtub of hell, he felt exhausted. It was a small victory for his willpower, but counting it as a victory only made it ridiculous again. He had been weakened back when he had returned from Afghanistan, but those injuries had not been self-inflicted. It had not been his own mental weakness which had drawn his physical strength down with it.

Tony had not cared about all this for weeks now, and he was not sure why it mattered to him now. It had to have to do with the changed environment: different people, near death experience, and a sober mind for a change of pace. Living in self-chosen isolation, bathing in self-pity and world-weariness, he had actually forgotten how hard normal living was.

Fuck, he wanted a drink so bad he would kill for it right now.
Getting his clothes on was comparably easy now, and for his shave, he could support himself on the washbowl. When he looked up in the mirror, he actually flinched.

"Jesus Christ..." the inventor murmured, squinting his eyes in a futile attempt to make the person in the mirror go away. It felt like he had not looked in a mirror for months and fuck, he looked tired and sick and wasted. He looked like a god-damn hobo with his beard and uncombed hair and those nasty silver hairs making themselves at home on his temples.

He looked old.

With a still slightly shaking hand, he started shaving his face, not sure if what was revealed under his stubbles was any better to look at. Aiming at his usual accuracy was pointless, he failed miserably at holding his hand still and he did not really care anyway, the rough shape would do.

Although he felt better regarding his body and comfort (counting out the pulsing in his head), his mood had darkened even more. Staggering to the door, the wall supporting his weight, he left the room, finding Steve waiting in front of it, like he was his bodyguard.

"Give me either a dry, really really dry, Martini or a loaded gun."
"I think I have to deny both requests."

Steve's answer was expected and worsened Tony's mood further, but the relieved look in the supersoldier's eyes when he observed Tony's refreshed appearance was at least something. Apparently, he no longer looked like he had lived under a bridge for the past two weeks.

"Feeling human again?" Steve asked encouragingly and stepped closer to him, reaching out to support his friend, but Tony violently waved him off. There was only one man in this room who had the biological right to behave like a senior citizen.

Still, Steve remained always close behind, in case Tony's legs refused to obey their owner's will which was not as unlikely as he wished it was.

Tony managed to walk the whole way to his bed, which he should probably find quite impressive for his state, but failed to get into it on his own.

This time, Steve did not even let him try nor did he give him an opportunity to protest, but simply lifted him bride-style and dropped him on the mattress. It earned him a death-glare from Tony, but the silent agreement that this had been necessary took away any real seriousness.

"Dammit, how much do you weight? I'm already beginning to feel bad because I ate your pancakes."

Tony did not answer, just let out a frustrated snort. He felt tired, both from the hot bath and the effort to take it and his muscles were shivering, but at least the gross smell of blood, alcohol, and vomit was gone.

"Everything alright, pal? I mean...you know what I mean."
Steve attached the tubes back to the IV and gave his friend a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. Tony couldn't blame him for it.
"Hey, you don't have to be ashamed of receiving help. Everyone needs help sometimes."
He knew that Steve meant well.

He knew, that the man actually cared, genuine and honest, because he was a person who could not harden his heart and turn his back on anybody. Steve had always been the last remaining person at a fight scene who talked to victims; he patted shoulders, and spread warmth, while Tony (and the
others as well) had been long gone, relaxing aching muscles in a hot shower.

What the billionaire simply failed to accept was that he was now one of these victims. Publicly, as well as personally, he had talked himself up to near invulnerability throughout his life, up to the point where he might have actually believed it. Not that he had really cared about his health - he had risked his life, several times, always ambivalent of whether he actually was interested in surviving or not.

Truth was, Tony had loved his life during the few years between Afghanistan and New York. After 40 years of struggling with himself and everyone else, he finally did what made him happy:

He had loved and had been loved back, he had had friends, he had owned more money than he could spend in his lifetime, he had had not only a job, which had been his obsession since childhood, no, he had even been a superhero, a real one, he had been able to give some of the gifts life blessed him with back.

Tony Stark had been invincible.

When they had killed Pepper right in front of his eyes, they had killed everything that was good in his life, the one thing he could not live without. When he had thought of the future twenty years ago, he had not seen anything - lately, when he had thought of the future, he had thought of Pepper.

He would've happily given his own life instead of her's; he would make any deal with the devil to bring her back - if the bastard would only offer him one.

Because Pepper could not die. She never was suppose to have been part of the game, her death had never been calculated and therefore had been no possibility to him. Now he was left here, alone, his life shattered and when he looked into the future he saw nothing again.

That he would be on the achieving end of disaster, not the shining hero who prevented it, was new to him, new and cruel and entirely impossible to cope with. There was just no version of Tony Stark designed for being the victim - and that was why Steve's cheery sentence was a nice gesture, but simply pointless, because it made no sense in the inventor's head.

"It's okay," Tony simply said, while his head was full of thoughts, raging inside of his skull and pressing painfully against his temples.

"Thanks, mate," he added, barely audible, because Steve earned it, really, "But let's never talk about that again, okay?"

There were a few minutes of silence after the supersoldier had nodded, a dangerous silence, because it meant closeness and made it too easy to accidentally speak out things which actually had a meaning.

He needed, really needed something, anything comparable to the dizzy numbness of alcohol to soothe himself a bit.

"Can you get me some sedatives?"

"Yeah...sure," Steve answered a few seconds later, his face taking on a slightly skeptical expression as the topic was brought back to the cause of Tony's miserable condition. Now, after he had fully seen the unglorified results, Tony almost expected to be lectured again.

"But, please, Tony... quit the alcohol."

His intuition had proven right again. The billionaire's expression darkened at the words and his
hands clenched into fists for a second as frustration flooded through him again.

Steve had tackled the topic often enough and Tony knew him to know that he was miles from giving a single fuck about his opinion – any opinion, really.

It stuck out a mile that Tony had a severe problem, but fuck - he just needed to sleep a bit, just needed a nightcup, just a glass.

"See you later," Steve said eventually when Tony did not answer, sighing tiredly. Even though the atmosphere had cooled down in the last few minutes, he gave Tony a quick, warm hug before he left.

Tony hated Steve right now, really hated him, because it was simply impossible to be mad at him. Even with the more than necessary touching, even with the endless repeating of moral advice, even when he carried him bridal-style.

The last thing he heard after the supersoldier had left was his voice from outside, where he stopped a nurse and told her to go get Tony some tranquilizers, something harmless that would help him sleep.
During the second surgery, Loki was never fully asleep, but drifting weightlessly in a dreamlike state. Confusing images of reptilian, grey-skinned beasts and foreign stars were flashing in and out of his vision, he could hear distant voices and feel a strange pulling sensation near his abdomen, but luckily he did not feel any pain.

The god had lost all sense of time when he drifted back, close to consciousness and struggling to wake up, to escape his confusing nightmares, but it took him a lot of effort to finally open his eyes.

Again, Loki’s hands were bound with thick shackles and he immediately noticed that they had brought him to another room, smaller than his previous one, even more plain, and without windows.

A frustrated growl escaped his throat - they had put him in a cell.

His frustration increased when he found that his whole body felt numb and heavy, obviously from the strong poisons they gave him to keep him calm. However, now freed from the constant pain and panic that always lurked close beneath the surface, he had the freedom to think straight again.

There was no time to wallow in his misery, he had problems to solve.

First of all: How could he free himself from the chains without wasting his desperately needed magic any further?

The solution was simple, if he estimated the human's reaction right. Loki let the spell that kept his Aesir disguise waver around his hands. When he thought about it now, it was quite a shame that he had never noticed the spell, something that was actually obvious, upon him for the majority of his life.

The skin on his hands, right up to his wrists, slowly changed colors into a sick blue and, once Loki was sure it looked convincing enough (although it was hard to look at his own hands from his lying position), he started shouting for help.

It took a woman a few minutes to appear, her expression unreadable, avoiding his gaze by keeping her eyes forward. Coward.

"I can not feel my hands anymore."
It was easy setting up the right expression - Loki was, after all, a master of manipulation – and he mimicked a slightly panicked tone perfectly. The startled gasp from the nurse gave him a satisfied chill and told him that his plan was working.

Loki watched the woman loosening the chains with quick, shaking fingers, making them loose enough so he could easily pull his hands out of the leather rings.

As soon as the god was left alone again, he did so, first pulling out the healthy hand (it still took a little effort and currently his mind was clear on the subject of not inflicting further self-harm) before he used it to open the second leather cuff.

Problem two - getting rid of the poison - was solved seconds later by pulling out the needle, but
problem three – clothing – turned out to be a little more difficult.

The room was empty, except for his bed and a small desk with medical supplies on it. No wardrobe, no boxes, nothing. However, he had a blanket.

It was not the best option, but once out of the building – wherever he actually was - he would find himself something more appropriate.

A little clumsy, Loki tried to peel the cover off his blanket with one hand while staying in an unpleasant lying position. The muscles in his abdomen were still paralyzed from the operation and did not submit to his will.

The god was half done with his task of getting the thin fabric off the heavy cloth (his arm was aching from exhaustion, nevertheless he did not stop) and had already draped half of it around his lean frame when the door opened again and every movement of the god stopped immediately.

"You cannot be serious!" Rogers spat as he took in the sight of what his prisoner was doing. The god did not even try to hide what he had been doing, it was more than obvious, his lips merely twitched into a tired, ironic smile.

The distance to the bed was closed in an instant, Loki's arm was caught in the soldier's vice-like grip and violently pressed onto the mattress again.

"You stay in this bed, understood? You stay here and stop jeopardize your health, because I am sick of people dying and almost killing themselves. You stay here and get well and you will help us to clean up this mess you caused. You listen?! You. Stay. Here."

The supersoldier was panting, his face flushed red, but he looked as if he immediately regretted his outburst.

"What would it take to make you stay here? What? Tell me."
Loki had expected that the Captain might force his hands back into the shackles or maybe beat him senseless in his anger, but no. Instead, the human finally offered to listen to his wishes. Loki's voice remained calm and composed when he spoke, even though his upper body was still pressed into the mattress with immense force.

"I want clothes and food. Real food, not of the kind you try to feed me through my veins. And my armor... I want my armor."

Loki knew that the last demand might sound strange to the human, insane even, it was obvious that it was beyond the mortal's mind what he wanted with the ruined piece of Asgardian handicraft.

He didn't plan to wear the armor again - a simply disgusting thought with all the blood and half-rotten Chitauri intestines splattered all over it - but there were still spells woven into the fabric and metal, spells that could be extracted and provide Loki with magic. Magic which he desperately needed right now.

Of course he would not tell Rogers - the mortal might suspect some malicious intention behind it. "Also, I want you to remove the chains. They are humiliating. And I can't, and won't, stay lying on my back until I'm fully healed.

Do you think me stupid enough to attack anyone in my current state? If I was strong enough to kill
someone, those ridiculous shackles wouldn't be a problem."

Loki added the last sentence with a smug expression on his face, seeing very well in Roger's face that he knew him to be right. It was not necessary to remind him of S.H.I.E.L.D's embarrassing attempt to put him in a cage – there was no earthly matter strong enough to undermine the power of his magic.

With a small sigh, Rogers let go of Loki and took a step back from the bed, his fists clenching and unclenching.

"Clothes can be arranged."

He kept his voice stern, still pondering whether to fulfill the other wishes or not, "Food, too - if you're able to digest it, anyway. I will talk to your doctor."

There was a moment of hesitation before he continued with a resigned nod.

"And no chains, deal - but you'll tell me what you want to do with the armor, first. And, if I advance on you, I want you to stay in this bed and cooperate. Is that clear?!"

Loki hesitated a few moments, staring up into the face above him, then he nodded.
"I will stay in the bed."

The god licked his lips, which were dry and tasted salty, thinking. He was not sure if it would be a good idea to tell the mortal about his armor, but in the end, he had nothing to lose. The God of Lies was going to be honest for once.

"My armor still contains some magic, which I can easily extract and use for myself, maybe to get rid of this nasty infection or close some of these wounds. You want me to get better, don't you? I can not help you as long as I am lying here."

The god bared his teeth in a grin. With the mortals' poison in his veins, it was easy to ignore the fear and panic in the back of his mind and put on his old cocky facade. A few clumsy pushes with his arms and Loki even managed to sit up a little, his back resting against the metal frame of the bed, not able to stop grinning at the Captain.

If the man only knew what Loki had in his possession... it would change everything.
"I'll see what I can do," the soldier just said reservedly, looking at the other's grin with strong distaste written all over his face.

"Is there a particular reason you seem to be having fun?"

Rogers knitted his brows in annoyance, sounding a little... sour, yes, sour was the right word.
"Yes, yes indeed. First, I am feeling exceedingly good compared to the last time I was awake, though I guess it is only an illusion caused by your Midgardian potions. And..."

The god giggled, an unhealthy, metallic sound coming from the back of his throat
"If you knew, you would not be sitting that calm..."

The captain's hands clenched into fists again as the sour expression on his face changed to suspicion and his whole body went tense. It was priceless.

"Oh, no. Don't fret, I am not planning anything. You don't have to look at me like that, but..."
Loki loved the agonized expression on the mortal's face, it was quite amusing to tease him and it reminded him of the the power he still possessed, even in his pathetic condition.

"...but I can proudly tell you, that I am in fact in the possession of something that could change
The silence in the room was so thick that you could have cut through it with a knife. Loki's grin flickered for a second, yet his eyes stayed fixed on Rogers when he mouthed the all-deciding words, "I have the Tesseract."

Loki knew that it was not wise to give away that certain information, but he needed something to bargain with, something that would increase his worth to more than some vague information about alien forces and technology.

The supersoldier looked like he was about to fall from his feet. He had frozen for a second, eyes wide, before he spluttered, his voice almost cracking, "You have what?! Where- where do you have it?!"

Strong hands gripped Loki's arms again, tight enough to make him flinch. The god had not anticipated that kind of reaction.

"Where do you have it?!!"

The small room vibrated with the volume of the man's voice and he was shaking Loki like the god was a mere puppet, all the captain's composure and reservation had vanished after the hearing that one word.

"If you lie now, I swear, there will be no more approaches from my side. Where is it?!!"

"Safe."

The god's answer was only monosyllabic, his smug expression had vanished from his face, yet his eyes were still locked with those of the mortal.

Rogers was close to loosing his temper, that much was obvious, and Loki foresaw himself being hurled against the wall in a sudden outburst - better prevent that in his current condition.

"I have hidden it in a dimensional fold, but I can't access it right now. My magic is drained – and, by Valhalla, get your damn hands off me!"

The god's voice hitched in an uproar of panic as the grip around his arms tightened and he was violently pressed onto the mattress again.

Rogers stayed in this position for a few seconds longer, observing Loki's features for any hint on whether he was lying or not, before he pushed away from the bed and turned his back on the god.

Loki watched him pacing back and forth in the small room, throwing glances at him as if to ensure that the god was still there.

"Nobody has access to this... dimensional fold you speak of except you, did I get that right?"

The Captain interrupted his pacing and moved to the foot of the bed, leaning onto the metallic bed frame.

It seemed to calm him down a bit when Loki confirmed that, but he still tightened his grip around the metal until his knuckles turned white. The god was certain his hands would shake if he had them free.

"How long would it take you to regain enough magic to get the Tesseract in our dimension again - with your armor provided? And - before you even think of making conditions and bargains - there won't be any deals with you on this matter. You will hand over the Tesseract and we will do everything we can to finally stop this madness. I don't even know if I should thank you for hiding it from the Chitauri for such a long time, since I suppose you stole it for your own purpose?"
"Always expecting the worst from me, hm?" Loki asked when his distress from the Captain's outburst had eased a little and he looked at the human, paying more attention to the soldier’s body language than his actual words.

"I took it from the weapon-vault during the Chitauri's attack. It was obvious that they were coming for the Tesseract, not anything else. If I had not taken it, the Chitauri would have it in their possession... months ago? I just wanted to point that out, so do not blame me for my actions. It is possible you owe me your life."

It was his hurt pride speaking now, spitting toxic rage in the Captain's direction, but his confidence faltered as he became aware of the tensed expression on the supersoldier's face. The god always expected some physical violence from the angry looking man, a hard punch in the face or hands closed tightly around his neck, regardless of what they said about his great kindness.

Instinctively, he pulled his blanket a little higher to protect his exposed skin before he added the information Rogers was actually asking for.

"It will take a few days with the armor. I have to use the greatest amount of my magic to close my wounds before I try any other spell."

Loki was not overly fond of the idea of giving up the Tesseract, but his priority was to know the Chitauri as defeated - particularly after what he had heard about the devastation they had caused in Asgard and even more what they had done to Thor.

The cosmic cube was a valuable weapon, yet Loki had no way to use it.

It would be sheer idiocy to keep it for himself out of pure greed, at least as long as Thanos was not defeated. Afterwards he could still steal it back, if he wanted to do so.

However, he was not so naive as to consider it probable that he would live long enough to witness this day.

"I'll be back tomorrow. Someone will bring you your armor, clothing, and food as soon as possible," Rogers eventually said without any further comment, locking eyes with Loki for a last time, as if to ensure only through his intense gaze that the trickster would stay in his bed and conform to the imposed conditions as he had promised.

The supersoldier left the room and, as it turned out, came through on his promises.

Only half an hour later (once he felt a little calmer Loki noticed the clock right above the door), one of the white clad women came in, putting a bunch of clothes on his bed and unfolding them, seconds later she tried to remove the blanket, which Loki had pulled tightly around his waist.

It took the god a few moments to realize that she wanted to dress him and with an annoyed growl he slapped in the direction of her hands, to far away to actually make a hit.

Nevertheless, she flinched away from him.

"Leave it be, woman. I may be injured, but I am not a helpless infant!" Loki snarled at the servant, grabbing the delivered clothes in the same instant and pulling the bright grey shirt over his head (maybe a little too fast - the raw wounds on his back, shoulder, and stomach stung unpleasantly, but he would never admit that) and with a little effort he also managed to put on the black underwear beneath the blanket.

Having clothes to cover his bare skin instantly made him feel a lot better, though they were no real protection against anything. At least the mortals could not stare at his wounds, at his obvious
weakness, like he was some kind of defenseless animal.

A little later he also received food.

To his great displeasure it was not what he had expected: it was a bowl of teeming hot soup. However, after several months (he was pretty sure right now that it had been months) without any food it was just the right thing for the start.

For a mortal's meal in this dreary facility, it tasted heavenly. Loki did not fight the healers as they injected him with tranquilizers for the night, actually, he was pretty sure that it was the only thing that could make him sleep right now. He even accepted his fate as they put the needle back into his arm – which did not hinder him from pulling it out the second they had left the room.

That night, Loki's slumber was deep and dreamless, and he was almost sad when he woke up the next morning only to have his mind start filling with worried thoughts again.

Like the day before, he received soup for breakfast, as well as some fruit yoghurt. The god devoured all of it with an appetite unknown to him.

Luckily, the good night's rest had increased his strength a little, so he was actually able to sit up without the help of the machine in his bed.

The wounds were still hurting awfully, especially the one in his abdomen, which was also itching and suppurating in a disgusting manner, ruining his newly received shirt. Yet it could have been much worse, and the god did not want to know how much poison the medics actually fed him to keep the pain on such a low level.

Loki's armor was delivered during midday.

The once magnificent clothing was reduced to nothing more than bloody shreds of leather, fabric and metal, and Loki felt disgust rising in his guts at the thought that he had worn this thing for over a year. Fortunately, there were still some spells intact. Not the one that protected him from direct physical damage, but the very strong shielding against electricity (especially created for fights against Thor), as well as the fire-shield.

Not much, but better than nothing.

It took a lot of effort, time, and concentration to peel the magic out of the object, like cutting off skin without hurting the flesh beneath, but it granted Loki a useful distraction for a while.

As soon as the spells were extracted, the god tossed the old armor away, only keeping the helmet. The beautifully crafted piece of head gear was placed on his nightstand right beside the bed.

The magic tingled pleasantly under Loki's skin and at his fingertips, making the fact that it would be gone in a matter of seconds for his health's sake painful to think about. Yet, healing was the more important issue right now.

Loki had to get out of this bed and do something. Every second of lying here was a waste of time, was a second that brought Thanos closer to his triumph, a second in which the dark threat in the corners of the universe grew.
The magic was consumed within seconds as Loki let it flow freely though his body, replacing the
cells that had been destroyed with fresh, new ones. None of his wounds healed completely, but it
was progress nonetheless. He had at least spared himself two days of normal healing, if not three.

Now, with time on his hands and most of his immediate wishes fulfilled, the god seriously
wondered why nobody from S.H.I.E.L.D had approached him yet, especially after his little
confession yesterday. Maybe they were too busy elsewhere (though it was hardly imaginable when
it came to the Tesseract), or, maybe, Rogers had not told them yet.

Maybe he had not, but for what purpose?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Tony had spent the last two days in his bed again. Steve had not shown up, and in a way he was glad for it, because it spared him the duty of dealing with him and the thoughts his presence brought with it. Nobody else had shown up either, not Rhodey, not Happy (he had dismissed his former driver with a fat redundancy pay and a life-long pension after Pepper's funeral), yet he had got a card (a fucking postcard - seriously?!?) from SHIELD, having only one sentence on its backside: "Get well soon, we'll have a few questions for you."

At least they granted him a few days of recovery, although the card was nothing more than a cold joke. They would appear in his room sooner or later and he would be happy to spit in their sunglassed faces when they did.

Nurses and doctors that ventured into his room were endured with a very, very low tolerance threshold for questions like "How are we feeling today, Mr. Stark?" or any other stupid remarks and, all in all, he found a grim pleasure in being a snarky asshole most of the time.

Being sober, together with being freed of most of his pain and sleeping in a dreamless, empty, and somehow dead-like state, felt strange and artificial - he knew nothing was okay and that he was wrecked, yet he could not physically feel it. This condition gave him an inexplicable feeling of nervousness and petulance, which was taken out on the poor psychiatrist who dared to offer him conversational therapy.

It also had the nasty notion to show him how freaking lonely he felt - not only felt: was. The more often he was reminded of it, which was every time anybody entered his room or he thought about anyone, the more he repelled any advances to get through to him. It seemed illogical, even to him, but it was like an automatic reaction, he could not help it.

With every hour, the desire to leave the hospital grew stronger and stronger. He felt caught, exposed to peoples' opinions which he did not want to care about. His life, which had been his problem and his problem alone, to endure and to live on with, was now observed by others. He would never open his heart up to one of these biased white coats - they could release him with a portion of pain killers and then kiss his ass for all he cared.

Even though he now had his tablet to distract himself with, he could not fully concentrate his attention on it. His thoughts were always slipping away - he blamed the sedatives for that - and he had no motivation to do anything useful. All he wanted was to get out of here and get all these goody two-shoes to keep their fucking traps shut.

Three days after Steve had last visited him, Tony had successfully taken a another shower. He had stood up at night, so that the chance that anybody might come in and become all helpful and patronizing was low. It took him three god-damn hours and a whole arsenal of curses, which would likely earn him an even more comfortable place in hell's inner circles, to finish the shower and fall back onto his mattress, feeling like a stone and with the dim grey light of dawn outside of his window. Being so weak was definitely something he had to change soon – his legs had almost given out the moment he had stood and he'd had to half lean on the wall as he crepted to the bathroom. Even with no one around, he had felt utterly embarrassed.

His look in the bathroom mirror had been a short one and he had gone without shaving - getting in and out of the tub had been exhausting enough - but he had realized how long his hair had grown.
There had even been the first hints of the horrible curls he got with longer hair, which had refused to disappear even when Tony furiously run his fingers through his hair to comb them backwards. He also still looked like a tramp.

After a few hours of sleep, his door had opened, not loudly and noisily like the nurses did when they entered the room to wake him up and mentally prepare him for breakfast or whatever horror they might bring. No, it was a low noise, careful and slow, and Tony's gaze darted towards the door, immediately suspecting an attacker. When he caught sight of the black suit and the half-bald head, he realized it was worse.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, not you."

"Hello, Mr. Stark. I hope you received our get-well-card?"

Tony had to bite his lip to stop himself saying something that would indicate he would've been happier if the man had just stayed dead that one time, instead he just snarled a moody "Get out." to Agent Coulson.

"Also a good morning to you. I think we will make it fast today, my schedule is rather tight at the moment."

Coulson did not make an effort to sit down beside the bed and gave Tony no starting points for another of his grumpy rants about the agent's unnerving presence. They had played that game for months now, yet of all the things the billionaire had grown tired off, insulting Coulson was not among them.

Fury's good eye had visited him only a couple of times since the attack almost four months ago, and every time the consequences of these encounters had worsened, usually including everything from threats, hair-rising insults, thrown bottles, and blatant repulser attacks.

Unfortunately, he was now missing his weapons and so he was afraid he would have to endure an average civilized talk with the agent. 'Civilized' being measured by their own, special scale, of course, which they had established throughout the years of interacting with each other.

A small USB-recorder was placed on Tony's nightstand and the necessary button pressed, then Coulson, who was masterly ignoring the inventor's sour silence, looked up to meet his eyes.

"Mr. Stark, what happened the night of the 22nd of August, 2013, and the morning of the 23rd of August, 2013?"

Tony could have just say that he didn't want to talk, but that would have been entirely too easy.

"Lots of stuff, I don't know. I mean, statistically there'd be at least two thousand people having sex. Maybe some committing murders and other abolishable crimes. The highest percentage of people would probably have been sleeping - if we're talking about Pacific Standard Time alone."

Coulson gave him his typical 'Not funny, Stark'-look, but Tony had not really been trying to be funny, he just did not want to cooperate with this man. The agent did not change his face when he saw that the billionaire's usual reaction, a smug grin, failed to appear on his face, he just repeated the question, adding "in your house." with an insistent undertone.

Tony let out a pissed-off grunt, again feeling trapped and unable to escape this annoyingly resistant man. By now he should've known that snooty answers did not help in getting rid of Coulson, but that was all that he had right now. Maybe Tony could make him go faster if he just told him what
he probably already knew.

"Okay, tell Fury that he again missed the fucking important stuff. Loki appeared in the middle of the night, fucked up and ready to black out on my floor. He then, uh-
"
He faltered for a second, frowning when he tried recapitulating what had happened exactly, because his memory for that night was quite blurred.

The genius had not thought a lot about Loki's offering from that night.
He had had other problems to wrap his sober mind around, but right now, he remembered all of it - and that the god, with the Tesseract, was still somewhere here in the building.
The idea of owning the Tesseract's power, to strike it in everyone's face who had let him down in the last months and into the faces of those who had destroyed his life, for a moment, seemed incredibly tempting.

"He then... wanted me to build him a weapon to defeat the Chitauri, who were chasing him, I said no, he pulled the Tesseract out of nowhere, I still said no, and told him that he was a stupid prick, since he had not even realized that Asgard was down as well. I think he had some, uh, mental breakdown, but was too weak to leave like he wanted to. Then the Chitauri came, beat our asses and blew up my house, and now I'm here and ready to run amok if somebody asks me any more questions."

With his beard stubble and bloodshot eyes, he probably looked like he really meant it, but Coulson seemed unimpressed.

"Ah, and I forgot to add: you remember what happened the last time you had the Tesseract, right? Don't make the same mistake again. Don't lose a third time against the Chitauri, it's pathetic. Your whole organization is fucking pathetic. You're crippled, down. You're capable man, Coulson - look for a new job, seriously."

He could almost see how his insults fell on deaf ears and it angered him, excessively.
Just how much SHIELD knew he did not know, but to be able to live up to their reputation they should know at least everything and more.
There was no explanation for Coulson's appearance here other than to confirm this information – and to mock him.

Yet, there was a short spark of genuine interest in the man's eyes and Tony wondered for a second whether he had revealed too much.
Whatever.
As if he would care if SHIELD started drooling again over valuable weapons – they would not be able to use them, anyway.

"Just one more question before I leave you alone with your thoughts. What happened to the Tesseract when the Chitauri attacked?"

At first, Tony wanted nothing more than to refuse to answer.
He just glared at Coulson with squinted eyes, angry, but tired, and his lips pressed shut as if to physically emphasize his unwillingness to talk.
Yet, in the end, to his own surprise, he mumbled a few words as an answer, insinuating that Loki had the cube.
He wanted to leave SHIELD stranded so badly, but not today. Today, they could do that to themselves.

With his expression still calm, Coulson nodded at Tony. Seemingly, he had gathered all the information he needed.
"Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Stark. Oh, I have to correct you in one matter. According to Captain Rogers' report, it was Loki who blew up your house, not the Chitauri. Have a nice day."

Agent Hill was not sure whether she should be happy or not that her job was talking to the captured God of Mischief and not the egomaniac superhero with depression, but considering his history with both of the subjects, it had been clear that Coulson would take care of Stark.

Maybe it was the better of two evils, after all, she could start up from zero with Loki, since they had never met long enough to have something like a real first impression - she knew everything about him, yet, only everything that SHIELD provided in their files.

After the events in the Malibu Mansion, she had been flown in from England and her colleague from another, more exotic part of the world.
That SHIELD needed two of its most efficient and renowned agents for this task was a serious indication that the matter of this investigation was explosive.

Little had been told to them when they had arrived and nothing made any sense:
Loki, appearing in Stark's house, had been followed by Chitauri-soldiers. The inevitable fight had happened, both Stark and Loki lived thanks to Captain America, and now both were in hospital.
From that point on - silence.
Loki’s armor had been ordered, the reason was not clear, but seemingly the order was authorized and meant no harm.

It was uncomfortable going into an interrogation with nothing at hand but a smidgin of information and quadrillions of questions, yet Hill was a professional, and had conquered more difficult tasks in her career.

The call to action had come unexpected, since SHIELD was still recovering from the strong hit it had taken and was going easy on all operations. The urgency of this mission indicated how desperately they clung to any glimmer of hope, any information which held the promise of possible value for them.
It had never been that hard to work for the organization - but only hard times could prove one's strength.

With a quick knock and a deep breath, Hill entered the quarantine room with two soldiers in front of it, closing the door behind her before she looked at the god in the hospital bed.

Loki's dozing had been interrupted by the sound of sharp heels hitting the ground outside of his containment cell, a clatter closely followed by a quick and totally unnecessary knock, before the door was opened and a woman strode inside.

He was not surprised at all, he had expected official visitors to come much earlier.
Yet the woman did not look like an agent of SHIELD - white blouse and black trousers, her blazer lying casually over her arm, and a whole pack of files in one hand. The only thing unfitting for a normal, midgardian woman was the gun attached to the belt at her hip.

Loki remembered her face, although only as a small detail in the chaotic blur of events. She had been there during his first arrival to Midgard, there were still a few glimpses of their chase through the tunnel left in his mind, but his memories ended with that.
"My name is Maria Hill, I'm a SHIELD agent. I will be asking you some questions and I would be delighted if you'd answer them truthfully, for the well-being of us all."

Loki watched her take a chair, sitting down and crossing her legs, before she shot him a business-like smile and pressed the button of a little device, lying it on the side of the chair.

"If you don't mind, I'd like you to recapitulate the events concerning your arrival on Earth chronologically, then I will ask for your reasoning."

Maybe she thought that her cool, even, brusque tone and her professional neutrality would unsettle him, but Loki was far from being intimidated.

"I already told Rogers everything, so why do you bother me with your presence, woman?" the god snarled at her question.

He only received a serious, slightly annoyed look in return and Loki soon understood that she would not leave without receiving any information.

"I doubt that my tale will be of any value to you, since I do not remember much about the incident anyway.

I came to Stark's house, knowing that he was renowned for building weapons, and intended to ask for one. He refused. When I tried to leave, my magic failed me, seconds later the Chitauri came. I'm guessing you know the rest of what happened."

Loki gesture to his abdomen.

"Thank you so far," Hill answered, obviously unimpressed by his very unsubtle insults. "What have the Chitauri been chasing you for? Is it still for revenge for the battle you lost in their name, or is there something else going on in the universe we should be informed about?" she asked, her gaze traveling from Loki's face over the rest of his body.

The god noticed her gaze halting at the unplugged tubes and the quick, almost invisible frown she gave his helmet, propped on the nightstand like a trophy.

The SHIELD-agent crossed her legs the other way around, her eyes again locked with Loki's, while her muscles tensed up a bit, accompanied by a slight faltering in her perfect facade. Somehow the displays of his privileged treatment seemed to disturb her, as did the fact that Loki was not answering, but taking in her every reaction intensely. Yet, this hesitation was only short-lived.

"To be frank, we don't know anything about what is going on outside the Earth. Our satellites and space stations are of no use in these matters and Asgard has not answered for a month. There has to be something you can tell us."

The god almost rolled his eyes at the question.

"There is only one thing I can tell you. You do not stand the slightest chance against the things that are coming.

The Chitauri did hunt me for a motive as meager as mere revenge and they could afford to loose a few hundred, maybe thousand warriors for that task. Their army is endless and their leader more powerful than anything you can imagine.

There is only one thing missing for his complete victory."

The moment the woman seemingly intended to ask what this missing piece might be, the door opened and a man stepped inside.
Loki did remember him, remembered his face, his voice - but more important, he remembered killing him.
He could almost physically recall the sensation, the exact pressure in his hand as he had pierced the mortal's chest with his spear, crushed his rips and sliced through the left lung.
That the human was standing in front of him, unharmed, alive, was a thing of sheer impossibility, because the god never, never missed his target.

"Why are you not dead?!"
The god shouted, all cool composure gone for a second, his voice a little higher than intended. That the human was still living could only mean two things, that either Loki had been really unfocused as he stabbed the man from behind or... Or this was no mortal, but a Chitauri in disguise. As horrible as it sounded, it seemed a lot more likely.

And this thing was standing only a few feet away from him, ready to strike him dead, or worse, drag him back into the void, back to the Titan, back to his mercy.
Horror befell Loki.

"You won't get me!"
His scream echoed through the quarantine room and he tore off one needle from the tubes as he launched himself forward, aiming for the creature's face.

The attack was not as energetic as intended, and he was caught by strong arms mid-movement. He was hurled against the nearest wall with a nasty crunching sound, and he slid down onto the ground.
Throbbing pain filled his head from the collision, yet he was still struggling to get back onto his feet, to fight or flee - without success.

Two heavy-armed guards rushed inside the cell and Loki was facing barrels once again. Shouted orders mixed with the agents' voices, but the god did not understand their words over the pounding of his own heart in his chest and the ringing noise in his ears.
Submission was out of question.

His grip tightened around the needle. Slowly, he raised his now violently shivering hand in front of him, ready to strike everyone that dared to come closer, his pupils blown wide from adrenaline, and his breath coming out in rasped gasps.

The god did not notice the red stain that had already begun to spread over his shirt.

"Stay calm, Loki, there is no threat! You're hurting yourself!"
Loki barely heard the woman's words as she pointed her gun at him, his frantic gaze flickered back to the creature every two seconds, expecting the worst.

One step closer and Loki would attack the thing, no matter the price, no matter if the soldiers would open fire or the beast would attack him.
Even death was favorable right now.

"If you would be so kind, the sedatives, please," the Chitauri ordered one of the soldiers, voice low, but tensed, causing Loki to let out an unarticulated yell and charge forward in a rapid movement, needle ready to be smashed into his opponent, set to kill.

The blast of a gunshot resounded in the small room for a few seconds, and Loki lost his balance as something hit his leg and grazed its surface.
He tumbled to the ground, drops of blood splashing onto the floor from his leg, where Hill's bullet had hit him. A moment later one of the soldiers was on him, holding him down as he continued to struggle.

"Sedatives, NOW."

The order from the woman sounded more insistent, and she stepped on Loki's hand, making him loosen his grip around the needle so she could shove the small thing across floor to the other end of the room with her foot.

Loki was heaved up by the two soldiers, still struggling and twisting and far from being willing to give up yet. He was pressed against the wall with experienced violence, while the third soldier rudely grabbed his head and pushed it to the side, only barely avoiding being bitten, and rammed one of the needles into Loki's neck.

The trickster's struggling increased rapidly for seconds, one last desperate attempt to free himself, then he felt his strength drain out of him. His body went limp in the guards' arms and his head dropped forward, only to see the red stain on the shirt growing more and more at a dangerous speed, colouring the entire shirt a bright red.

It was the last colour he saw before his mind was once again forced back into unconsciousness.

Maria exhaled a gasp of relief, slowly lowering her gun. The two soldiers heaved the unconscious god onto the bed again while the other one dashed off to get a doctor.

"That shot was unnecessary," she heard Coulson say from behind her, "they would've gotten hold of him before he could have reach me. But anyway, nice reflexes."

She did not react to that statement. Now that the situation was deescalated, her criticism reappeared.

"Why did you come? He was about to tell me something important, I know it, and now he-"

"He's got the Tesseract."

That statement effectively silenced her, her mouth still open in mid-sentence. For their own good, none of the soldiers listened.

"What?" Maria got out eventually.

"Follow me."

Obviously, Coulson did not see that he owed her an explanation, instead he just took her upper arm and escorted her out of the room, which was filling up with doctors and nurses.

While they were hurrying down the hallway, he talked into his earpiece, demanding double security and a direct call to Fury as soon as possible.

After he had pulled her into the cafeteria, which was completely empty except for a few old people who stared at them like they were aliens what with their neat suits and their guns still in their hands, the agent explained his short talk with Stark and the all-changing results in a few, quick sentences.

That Maria would stay stationary was quickly arranged, a measure to ensure there would be no
information like that getting lost again, and Coulson hurried to the black limousine parked in front of the building.

While Maria would be watching the operation and security-actions, waiting for Loki to awake from his forced slumber (this time tranquilized and chained again), he would be having a long flight to look forward to.

Chapter End Notes

Here is the weekly update!
This has been the last chapter that was entirely set in the hospital.
Also, kudos and comments are much appreciated, we both put a lot of effort in this fic and some response would do great for our motivation :D
Loki has a plan and brings it into action.

Loki woke up in agony and with chains attached to his wrists, the wound on his stomach feeling even tighter than before.

It took a few minutes for his mind to clear completely of the effects of the anesthetics and, as the god was now fully awake again, there was pain and subtle panic fogging his mind and making thinking a difficult task.

There was only one thing he was certain of: he had to get out of here.

Since the realization had struck Loki at the sight of the rightfully dead agent yesterday, he continuously wondered how ignorant he had been not to consider the possibility of infiltrators. The Chitauri’s reputation as masterful shapeshifters was known even in the farthest corners of the universe and he, their enemy on the run, had not thought about it once. Every other damn mortal in this building could be one of those aliens.

Maybe one of the agents who could use his or her position to claim the Tesseract from him, or maybe one of the mortals’ healers; one of them could easily plant something beneath his skin or inside his head to gain control over his mind and body - even the blonde soldier, their best man, the Captain, could be a fake.

As Loki’s thoughts started spiraling with these endless possibilities of threat, of possible death, and eternal slavery, his decision became final. There was nobody whose identity he could trust, nobody who was not prone to the Chitauri’s skills of shapeshifting, nobody who could prove his or her identity-

Except... Stark.

There was proof that Stark was himself, worn involuntarily, but proudly, right in the middle of his chest: the shiny blue device which had already once played a part in their encounter, unique and impossible for the Chitauri to copy. Again, as if fate had decided for them to stick together, he was the only possible ally.

Even though it seemed almost impossible considering his current situation, the only wise way to proceed was to find Stark and get out of here. Stark would come with him, whether the mortal wanted it or not, Loki would find a way to persuade him. With an ally, he's have somebody to watch his back and serve him as a chance for new power or merely have someone he could use as a human shield in battle. Loki had to hide somewhere, or better, return to Asgard with a functionary, powerful weapon.

Now that he had found a goal to achieve, it was not overly difficult to rid himself of his chains a
third time; he pull on them with all the force he could muster until the metal broke apart.

The next step was a lot more challenging. Standing on his feet and walking seemed unthinkable, a miracle on its own, but with slow, controlled movements and with one hand desperately grasping the bed, Loki managed to stand. He was swaying dangerously, but he was on his feet.

The first few steps were difficult and cost Loki a lot of energy. The wound on his lower leg, although merely a graze, was especially impairing and hurt every time he put weight on his leg.

He gritted his teeth, suppressing any desires to stop or give up, and soon his weakened muscles remembered the right way to move and, after three steps, he was slowly walking across the room, limping, but without falling. However, the hardest part was yet to come. Somehow, he had to get out of his room without the guards noticing, and find Stark.

The first of these tasks was impossible to achieve without the use of magic and the trickster was not looking forward to spending the little magic he had collected throughout his stay on his escape, but this was important and he could not allow himself to be miserly.

He would require two spells to fulfill his quest; first, he'd need an invisibility spell, then one that would allow him to move through solid objects.

As he walked through the door, the god feared that his painful loud heart-beat would betray his presence to the guards. Moving through the heavy metallic object had caused his magic to begin faltering at an alarm rate. He was now standing between two guards, controlling his breathing and every movement, fortunately still unnoticed.

Loki barely made it around the nearest corner before both spells faded. For a second, his vision blurred and he almost dropped to his knees from exhaustion, but, to his great luck, nobody was around and the deep night had clothed the corridor with darkness.

The god took a moment to gather his energy, leaning against one of the walls and taking a few deep breath, before moving on. He could not allow himself to lose time.

In one of his clearer moments, Loki had listened to one of his guards mentioning that Stark was just one floor above, but still it took him an awful long time to find the right room. He peeked into a dozen different rooms, narrowly avoiding being discovered by a handful of healers.

Finally, Loki spotted a familiar figure in room number 132 and stepped carefully inside, his eyes never leaving the sleeping face in front of him.

"Stark."

The human did not react to his whisper and, instead of raising his voice, Loki grabbed the human's shoulder and shook it.

"Wake up, we have to go. It is not safe here... Wake up!"

The mortal awoke with a start, getting up on his elbows in a rush, abruptly pulling as far away as he could from the source of the unwanted shaking.

Stark's brown eyes took a moment to focus on Loki's frame. Behind the dullness of the sedatives that clouded the inventor's eyes, the god could see confusion
and even something akin to fear.

Only slowly did Stark seem to comprehend who the person bowing over him was and his gaze quickly raced over Loki's entire frame- his shivering legs, the visible bandages under his plain shirt, and the messy hair- before they fixed on Loki's eyes.

"What the hell are you- is this an assault? How'd you get here?!!" Stark hissed, attempting to sit up straight.

"That does not matter. We have to get out of here. It is not safe."

The god's voice was hushed and sounded a little nervous, but he allowed himself the luxury of sitting down on the bed, giving his exhausted legs some rest. The confused and annoyed expression on the human's face told him that Stark wanted an explanation - damn it, why did everything have to be so difficult!?

This was not the time to explain, soon the guards would notice his absence from the isolation cell.

"There is something about the Chitauri you need to know. They are shapeshifters, they can copy the form of anyone they want. Every single person surrounding us could be one of them, a fake, who could use his or her position to gain the Tesseract from me. You are the only one I can trust right now, because you have proof that you are yourself."

Loki tapped the glass surface of Stark's reactor. However, the mortal did not respond, he only made a grunting noise and wrinkled his brows in an unbelieving expression.

"You want to see the Chitauri dead, yes? Do not let them take the cube from me... use it for your own technology."

Loki's previously panicked tone had changed into something else, his words gained a flattering and soothing touch.

Stark was the god's only chance to use the energy that had fallen into his hands and he would not let such an opportunity slip through his fingers. Loki could feel it; the human just needed a little push.

"You want revenge for your woman? This is your opportunity, your only one. Build a weapon out of the cube that will wipe these abortions out of existence. You won't have another chance."

Something changed in Stark's face when Loki mentioned the inventor's woman and his mouth, open in anticipation of rejecting the god, fell shut. There was a short moment of tense silence, an almost suffocating quietness in which even the ticking of the clock felt unnaturally and almost threateningly loud.

Outside, they heard steps coming closer, passing the door, and then fading into the distance again. They had to hurry.

"Great, we'll just limp out of the main entrance at a snail's pace and get a taxi, which will bring us right to the next nut house. Look at you, you're wearing fucking underpants and yes, I know, this applies to me as well."

When the inventor answered after what felt like an eternity, he skipped over the part about an agreement and went straight to the immense problems they were facing, but Loki was having none of this. He knew that they - should they actually manage to escape this place - would be faced with a fresh
wave of other problems.

The constant throbbing pain in his abdomen, not to mention the panic of being discovered lurking in his mind, was decreasing his already miserable mood and making him impatient and his cool facade falter.

"Spare me your mewling! Do you think you have a choice? Do you wish to die in this bed with your throat cut open? If the Chitauri even show you that much mercy, after you destroyed a whole battleship on your own."

Loki’s angry snapping prohibited any attempt at an objection.

This stupid mortal had no idea what was coming for the human race. He didn't realize that Loki’s offer of assistance was the only way for him to survive, maybe the only way for his whole species to survive.

Not that Loki believed Stark capable of understanding the impact of all this.

"I have enough magic left to get us both out of this place unnoticed. We will steal a car, drive to your house, and get any necessary equipment there. I am sure you have some fellow Midgardians out of SHIELD you can trust."

Driven by his self-inflicted urge to prove his point to Stark, Loki pushed himself to his feet again and walked over to a cabinet in the corner, delighted to find some clothing in there. The god picked a couple of random pieces and tossed them over onto the bed.

Unluckily there was nothing that would have fit his taller frame, no matter how thin he was, and, after searching through the whole cupboard, he turned back to Stark, only to find the mortal sitting there, unmoved.

"Stop gaping at me and put the damn clothes on! Get out of the bed!"

Frustrated by the human's lethargy, Loki grabbed the blanket and tore it away from the mortal, throwing it to the floor. It was easier to ignore the pain and exhaustion in his own body as long as he had something to distract himself with, especially such an annoying individual as Stark.

"Get out of the bed, Stark, or I will make you get out of it!"

Apparently startled, the human blinked at Loki, looking uncertain as to how to react to this outburst. Loki felt more than tempted to make his threat a reality, but then the mortal finally moved.

Wordlessly, Stark grabbed one of the pairs of trousers without seeing which and started putting it on. It took an agonizingly long time, but, despite his impaired physique, the mortal managed to throw a scornful glance at Loki after he had heaved himself out of the bed.

"Did they shit in your brain or what? I can't believe I'm doing this... anyone ever told you you are freaking mental?"

Stark's muttered insults contrasted his actions, so Loki allowed him to murmur whatever he wanted as long as he continued to pack the things from his small bedside-table. When he was done, he turned towards the god again, ready to leave.

"So, give me a nice car and I'll hot-wire it."
Loki hardly waited for the human to finish his sentence. His pale hand grabbed Stark's wrist and with a strong, supernatural pull, they were torn out of the room and found themselves outside within a split-second.

The spell had almost been too much for Loki and as his feet hit solid ground again, he stumbled forward, grasping vainly for something to hold on to. All in all however, everything had gone reasonably well.

Judging from temperature, background noise, and the smell, they had made it outside, and, after supporting himself on a car hood and stopping the dangerously swaying of his legs, Loki took a look around, remembering the parking lot in front of the building. Perfect.

Loki knew he couldn't endure standing upright much longer, the shaking of his legs was increasing with every second and his fingers were clawing desperately into the piece of metal he was leaning on, knuckles visibly white.

"Oh you gotta be kidding me!"

Stark was cursing beside him, adding a "Goddamnit!" as he was obviously battling the effects of the spell on his weakened body as well.

With a loud thud, the inventor's body fell ungracefully against the car Loki was leaning on and, for a few seconds, there was silence between them, both men catching their breath and regaining their composure, before Stark's gaze fell on him. The human cocked his eyebrow sceptically at Loki, then turned around to face the car-door, unable to keep his mouth shut at the most inappropriate of times.

"Whatever you do, jus' don't vomit on my feet..."

The car they had chosen was ugly and old from everything Loki could see, and Stark, not even thinking for a second about more profound methods, simply checked their surroundings once before ramming a large stone through the driver seat's window. The noise it made was terribly loud in the silence of the night and Loki hissed disapprovingly, but, with a few quick movements of Stark's hands, the door was unlocked and Loki was ordered onto the second seat.

Usually, Loki would have replied harshly if a mortal had talked to him in that matter, but at the moment, he was just grateful to have something to sit on. Stark cleared his own seat of glass splinters and got in as well, cursing under his breath. The god stopped watching the human and threw nervous looks over to the building's entrance every two seconds, hearing the mortal fumbling at his side with something beside the steering wheel, until the motor became alive with a sudden stutter.

"Could be a rough ride. I've never driven such scrap metal in my life."

Loki's only appreciation for the warning was a nod.

As he looked over at Stark, he could see the exhaustion written all over his face and in his trembling fingers, yet his eyes fixed on the asphalt in front of them and with a roar of the motor, they were rushing down the parking lot as fast as the car was able to.
So, they are finally out of the hospital, yay! :D
That means more action from now on, I don't want to spoiler...
As always, a big thanks to our beta Yue!

Than you very much for reading and please don't forget to leave a kudos and a comment!
Well, that had gone a lot better than expected. Finally, the mortal listened and did as he was told - Loki could not have guaranteed Stark's health if he had continued to refuse to obey. Now however, in the car and on their way to Stark's house, the god allowed himself to relax, although only a little. He dozed off several times during the ride, barely noticing the rough maneuvers the engineer pulled with the overstrained car. Loki stirred again when the machine stopped, a look outside the window telling him that they had arrived at their destination.

The house, the whole property, seemed to be abandoned. There were no lights on inside and everything - shattered windows, broken walls, bursted doors - was covered in yellow tape that seemed to serve the purpose of preventing strangers from getting in or out, though Loki could not fully comprehend how that principle worked.

Both men slowly walked towards the ruin, anxiously trying to make no noise. One could never know what lurked in the darkness – this theory was unfortunately proved by the situation in which the two had left the house last time. With Stark walking in front of him, his expression unreadable in the darkness, Loki let his gaze wander. A huge, gaping hole in the front wall served as a doorway to Stark's living room, and both males were careful as they stepped inside.

The walls of the huge living room were still scorched black and the furniture was nothing more than burned wood or piles of ash on the floor. Even the puddle of blood, now a dark red, almost brown smear on the ground, was still there. The silence around them was almost calming, a quietness only achieved when there was no creature around, just nature and silent concrete. The Chitauri corpses had been the only things cleaned away, as expected.

"You should collect the things you need. Do you own another car?"

The billionaire raised an eyebrow at him before he, with what could have been a sigh, nodded. "Good, then we will take it."

With those words, Loki walked off, making a low hissing noise every time he stepped onto splinters of glass with his bare feet.

Eventually, he reached the room where the mortals stored their food; Loki looked around for the cooling unit he remembered was known as a fridge (he had seen such a thing during the few days he had spent with the mortals before his assault on the city of New York) and, after identifying the
targeted large, white machine, he approached and opened it.

A second later, Loki stepped back, startled, with an arm rising to cover his nose and mouth. The inside of the fridge was dark, yet the nauseating smell wafting from the machine was enough to tell him that the food was completely rotten. The buzzing of dozens of flies coming out of the machine proved this point.

By Valhalla, what had Stark been doing in here before Loki visited him?!

Considering its state, the food most likely had not decayed in the last few days that they had spent in the mortal's hospital. It had to have been lying in here for weeks, rotting undisturbed – which was not an unimaginable theory, considering the weight the human had lost since their encounter in New York.

Loki grimaced. Disgusting.

With an almost violent movement, the god closed the door again and turned around to look in the cabinets for food. He only found some paper packages and metallic tubes, but since they had pictures of food printed on them, he was pretty sure there was at least something inside.

How he craved a decent meal! He could not remember the last time he had eaten something worth calling a 'meal', in a pleasurable atmosphere, with the time it required to cook.

His arms stuffed full of the goods he had found, Loki returned to the great room in the centre of the house and walked down the scorched, partiality blood covered stairs where he had seen Stark disappear.

"Go to the bathroom and get everything you find in the second drawer of the white cupboard. I'm just about finished down here."

Stark's voice had greeted Loki from somewhere in the back of the cellar before the god had even made it completely downstairs.

The human, as Loki stepped off the last stair, added, "Ah, and when you type 4-8-2-1-1 in the safe hidden behind the Metallica-poster right there, you'll find some cash and other stuff, just in case."

Loki dropped the scavenged food on to a table and started turning toward the still talking human, stopping mid-movement as the sight that met him caused his relatively eased mood to sour.

"What do you think you are doing there, you useless creature?"

With a few, quick steps Loki was going at the mortal, a sharp pain and a rush of nausea telling him it was a little too fast for his weakened state, but the god ignored such trivialities and pulled the glass out of Stark's grip, shattering it on the ground in a resolute gesture.

Splinters of glass, mixed with splashing Whiskey, covered the floor.

Silence followed, both men first staring at the broken glass, then at each other, before something in the billionaire's eyes snapped.

A litany of very rude insults from Stark's mouth gushed over Loki, some of which could only be described as very personal - definitely too personal for the god's taste. The mortal almost demanded to be put in his place, and damn it, Loki would gladly fulfill this demand.
Not allowing the inventor's sentence to end, Loki grabbed Stark, his grip painfully tight, by back of his neck and shoved him against the nearest wall.

"You listen to me, mortal! As long as you are working together with me, you will stay sober. I have no use for you as long as you are an apathetic wreck living in a pile of his own waste and rotten food. Do you understand?!"

Loki's grip tightened further around the other man's neck, hard enough to leave some very colourful bruises there.
When he received no satisfying answer, he shook the inventor, violently ramming the billionaire against the wall a few times.

"When we are done here, I do not care if you drink until you vomit the squished remains of your liver, but as long as we are working on something important, you stay away from the liquor. Or else I will break your legs and drop you somewhere so far away that even water will seem exquisite!"

The slightly shocked expression of the man before him told Loki enough to know that his words had at least had some kind of impact, so he released the human and returned to the bar, where he took the remaining bottles and let them all shatter on the ground, one after the other.
Hopefully, Stark would not try to lick it off the floor - if he did, Loki really looked forward to seeing him with his mouth fill of blood.

With a last securing look in the human's direction, Loki walked back upstairs, eventually finding the bathroom after a few minutes of searching through the house. Not giving it a second look, he took the cupboard's ingredients, using his shirt as some kind of bag for all the little boxes and flasks full of small, rattling pills.
The described poster was ripped off the wall and tossed to the ground, the safe opened with the provided numbers and the cash taken from the hidden place behind the metal door.

"Here you go."

Loki dropped said things beside the food on one of the last intact tables when he was back downstairs. He then let himself drop onto the remains of a half-shredded sofa, the exhaustion he felt now at a level he could no longer ignore.

He knew that they could not allow themselves to rest here, there was only a little time left.
It was more than likely that S.H.I.E.L.D had already discovered his absence from the cell and, as soon as they noticed that Stark was also missing, they were going to look here first.
He and Stark had to be far away when the agents approached this place.

With a low, pained moan, Loki lifted himself back up from the soft surface and walked over to the pile of goods on the table.

"Which one do we take?" he asked, gesturing towards the several cars at the end of the room.

"This one."

Stark pointed at a white car with sleek, soft lines, and, after a closer look, Loki noticed that its trunk was already filled with what looked like a golden-red suitcase and a lot of machine parts.
Together with the food and the medication Loki had brought from the bathroom, the remaining space was entirely filled.
So, as it seemed, this part of the plan was also complete.
"Jarvis, shut everything down. Don't make it too easy for them if they intend to find anything."

Loki had heard that name before, not knowing who or what exactly hid behind it, yet, whatever it was, answered by slowly dimming the lights, until only one remained over the car. If their situation would have allowed it, and if he had not been so awfully tired, the god would have asked about this, as well as had a closer look at the remaining pieces of what Stark had once called his home.

Yet, Loki was already inside the car when Stark slumped down in the driver's seat with a long drawn-out groan and shut the door with a loud bang.

The peaceful silence in the car, reinforced only by the humming noise of the engine after Stark turned the key, was strangely soothing, lulling, tempting the god to fall asleep again. Stark seemed equally worn out, his exhaustion only noticeable by the fact that he kept quiet for once, his head leaning against the head rest with closed eyes. He remained in this position for several minutes; the car, although ready to leave, didn't move an inch, and at some point, Loki could not hold back.

"Is there something holding you back from leaving? There is no time for your pathetic nostalgia right now."

Stark merely sighed and slowly turned to face Loki, looking an awfully lot like he wanted to say something important.

"This is the deal: I provide the material, I provide the knowledge, I build the weapon, I drive the car - I drink whatever the fuck I want to drink, whenever I fucking feel like it. You're not going to get anywhere without me, pal, this thing we've got here is mutual."

Without waiting for Loki's reaction to his little announcement, Stark pressed down the gas pedal, carrying them out of garage on screeching wheels. The quick scraping by the concrete wall, caused by his slightly uncoordinated maneuvers, belied Stark's former words, but the inventor left it uncommented and simply raced down the driveway.

As soon as they had left the front gate of the estate behind them, both men became aware of the plight they were in: Where were they to go? For now, the car turned left, but Loki felt like that decision was entirely arbitrary.

Again it was Stark who broke the silence, floating a suggestion Loki did not like at all.

"Brain storming: any other ideas besides leaving the state on my jet?"

His tired eyes were fixed on the passing-by road markings. From what the god could see, he used them as an orientation, driving over them rather than in his lane.

"Such a trip would include my pilot, if you don't want me to fly."

"No, no pilot. We can not involve anyone when we do not have a full guarantee that said persons are themselves. It is too dangerous. You will fly. You can fly, can you not?"

A disapproving snort came from the seat beside Loki and there was no need to look in Stark's direction to know what kind of face the man was pulling right now. The god was thinking feverishly. There had to be a person they could trust, someone with whom they could be certain that he was not just a fake, a disguise - someone with unique attributes.

Yet, it was a hard task: Loki barely knew any Midgardans and his thoughts always circulated
around the few personalities he had met during his time here. He stared out of the window while the coastal landscape rushed past him, every branch leaving them with less possibilities to chose from.

The biggest problem they had to face was the fact that all of their choices were humans, no matter how powerful and important. All of them were without a special physique that would make them impossible to copy for the Chitauri.

The Captain was extraordinary in a way, but he was still a mere mortal, no matter how strong and persistent. Additionally, it was safe to assume that he would carry them both back into the hospital and chain Loki to the bed.
Not a choice.

Well, that only left one Midgardian as a real consideration:
The Green Beast.
It was nothing Loki liked to admit, but the creature fulfilled every criterion: unique physique, not a member of SHIELD (from all he had heard, the beast had been more like a opponent of their doings), yet he was a friend of Stark, and, as far Loki knew from Barton, also a scientist.
The decision was made then.
"Where is the beast? The green one that is also a scientist. Maybe it could help us?"

Stark gave a dry laugh at that suggestion, the movement making his hands, and by that the whole car, swerve dangerously.

"Banner's somewhere in Cambodia or Mexico or some other polluted pit of misery, I don't know. He's probably making the blind walk again and the paralyzed see," the inventor spat with undisguised contempt.

It was obvious that something had happened between the two men, something that annoyed and hurt the mortal at the same time, but at this point Loki couldn't summon up even an ounce of sympathy.

He had enough worries, and the longer they drove, the stronger all of them grew. He could now feel a strange and painful pulsing in his abdomen that had not been there an hour ago.

At the moment the pain was not so bad that he could not ignore it, yet it grew stronger with every minute. He had to concentrate.

So, Banner was not a choice either, nothing else mattered for the god's calculations right now.

Loki’s distracted mind was catapulted back into reality when Stark abruptly sped up the car, eluding a frontal crash with an upcoming vehicle by a mere three inches.

"I own grounds around, not built to live in, but for working purposes. They're known to SHIELD, though. A hotel, maybe. Got a friend half an hour from here, but he's from the military, yet has nothing to do with SHIELD."

Stark listed what came into his mind, utterly indifferent to the fact that he had almost ended their little trip mere seconds ago.

His suggestion only earned him an annoyed sigh from Loki. The god was actually too tired to think, and the mortal didn't seem to be grasping the essence of the danger they were in.

"You do not understand. As far as we know, everyone around here could be an enemy. Let's just find a place to stay for the night. I require rest before I plan anything."

He heard an approving grumbling from Stark and, with squealing wheels, the car stopped. The
inventor preformed a sloppy three point turn, and drove them back towards the city.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and please leave a kudos!
Another chapter will be up next saturday.
Nightmares

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki manage to rent a motel room, but something doesn't go along with the plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Both men stayed silent for the rest of the drive and, after a couple of minutes, they stopped in front of an unspectacular-looking hotel.

Tony ordered Loki to wait in the car - it would not inspire any confidence in the building’s owner if the god walked into the foyer wearing underwear and a ratty T-shirt that covered bloodied bandages- and, thankfully, the god obeyed and waited.

Their check-in went smoothly and without any problems, the worn-out face of the owner told Tony that he was not particularly interested in the people who rented his rooms, as long as the payment was right.

Tony returned to the car as quickly as possible and told Loki to follow him into their room, avoiding the foyer by using the fire exit stairs outside.

The room was small and ordinary with only one double- bed, a desk, a few chairs and a tiny bathroom. Tony would probably sleep better on the floor than on the provided mattress, which was lousy and stank of mold. He’d have to share a blanket with the God of Mischief, but at the moment he didn’t give a fuck about comfort. He just needed to rest, before his body gave out and caused him to faint- his legs already felt like jelly and he knew it wasn’t safe to stand on them any longer.

The atmosphere was uncomfortable for both of the men – they were still kind of enemies, but also bound together in their complicated situation, both of them injured and tired and about to sleep as closely together as a couple.

Yet, Tony refused to care just now.

All other things- like the fact that his quite conspicuous sportscar, that contained everything they needed, was parked just around the corner, and his phone had collected 23 unanswered calls in the last two hours, AND they were lacking any acceptable whereabouts to carry out their plan, PLUS their whole situation, in general, was sheer madness- could be cared about tomorrow.

Without any comment or look, Loki dropped himself onto the bed, facing away from the inventor, and nuzzled his face into the blanket.

"Move," the billionaire had growled at the god after he had sunk down onto the bed himself, abstaining from undressing or anything of the like. Tony merely laid his head on the pillow and closed his eyes, not even sure (or interested in, for that matter) whether he had locked the door or not, for his head was starting to sway and abruptly changing images of no obvious relation were starting to flash before his inner eyes.

He stopped resisting his desire to sleep as his thoughts became heavy and he let himself be dragged
into an uneasy slumber by a mixture of complete exhaustion and days of restless semi-sleep.

The unsettling rivers of thoughts that had been flowing through his brain slowed to a trickle and smoothly morphed into dreams.

There they were again, the nightmares; endlessly repeating impressions of the same things, the same people, the same pain, angst, and powerlessness. It was like his brain took revenge on him for his attempt to escape this torture for only a few nights, showing him every single detail of the moment he had seen Pepper die, in close-up, high definition, and slow-motion. It showed him his own silent scream and how useless he had been, his whole body, every single weapon he had, impotent and without significance, while the look in her eyes, opened wide in surprise in the moment she realized she was hit, had penetrated his soul and burned his insides to ashes.

"Stark, wake up."

The god’s voice was low, too close to a whisper to break through the layers of horror behind the genius’ eyes.

"Wake up and be silent."

Then something, an urgent touch on Tony’s shoulder, and finally, the mumbling and tossing stopped.
Tony’s eyes opened, his rapid breathing stopping completely for a second, then the realization of being awake set in and he was grateful for it.

For a few moments, he just stared at the ceiling, his thoughts caught in the darkness around him, unable to make out where he was or what was happening, until he remembered the ugly color of the curtains and the distinct smell of the cheap hotel they were in. The echoes of his dreams were still present in his head and his mouth had a bitter taste in it that was similar to stale alcohol after a night of drinking. Still, he managed to adjust slowly to the fact that right now there was no need for his heart to be beating a million times per second, that he did not need to jump up and run, run to save her, run for the sake of her life and his, or simply run away from all of this. As a child, one was told not to be afraid of dreams, that dreams were not real and could not harm one - but the things in his head were real, more real than anything he did while awake, and his dreams were always the same. He was always too late.

"Fuck..."

He groaned, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes and realizing that he was soldering hot, his wounds making his body feverish and causing sweat to build in small trickles on his forehead. Tony did not need to look around to know that Loki had interrupted his sleep and was watching him now. Did he scream? Hopefully not, god, at least he had not cried.
He released his eyes, seeing dancing stars when he opened them, but did not turn around to face the god.

"'S'okay," the billionaire muttered, really hoping Loki would not ask any stupid questions. He knew that it would have been best if he had simply gone back to sleep, a look outside told him that it was not even dawn, but he did not want to. There was nothing that could have made him deliberately endure that again, and, although he did not feel rested or like he had been sleeping at all, in fact he felt more like he’d just run a marathon, he wanted nothing more to get out of that bed and away from Loki. The room was suffocating and the presence of another person, judging him, watching him, while he tried to cope with his most personal problems, made him feel sick.

"I'll, uh, go and get some fresh air."
He sat up, grimacing at the rush of pain which eagerly reminded him that he was not free in choosing what movements his body should be allowed to perform. Walking, however, worked and he successfully scooted off and around the bed in the semi-darkness before hitting his shin against a chair, causing him to stumble and curse vulgarly.

"Shut up, okay, simply shut your fucking mouth!" he snarled at Loki, making sure the trickster did not even think about commenting on his actions, although the god had not even opened his mouth yet.

"Hell, why'd you break those fucking bottles?!"

"I’ve already explained my reasoning. How are you supposed to build a useful weapon when your mind is fogged with liquor?"

The god tilted his head, looking up at him with raised eyebrows like Tony was some kind of stupid child that needed to be lectured about the most rudimentary truths.

"I also doubt that drinking away your thoughts will help, quite the contrary; it will only make it worse every time the alcohol’s effects fade - but I’m guessing you do not care about what I am saying, am I right?"

Tony was just about to answer, having stopped rubbing his hurting shin, when a malicious grin spread over Loki’s face and the trickster straightened his posture. Even before he had said a word, Tony knew there was a 90% chance he would hate the god for what he was about to say.

"Everything is too much for that weak mortal mind of yours; your numerous attempts to escape reality are proof enough. Yet, there is one thing I do not quite understand: If everything feels so bad that you cannot endure it with a sober mind...why have you not killed yourself already? What is a life full of pain - if what you have been doing in your house is worthy of being called a life-worthy? What are you still living for? Hmm?"

Tony had his mouth opened already to give a cutting answer by the time the god had finished, but he closed his lips again when he realized he did not know what to say. His glare stuck on Loki’s eyes, rage, the defiant rage of somebody caught at his weak spot, radiating from it.

Why hadn’t he killed himself? Tony did not know. His whole lifestyle had always been what other people would’ve called a suicide-commando. He had thrown himself in front of barrages of gunfire, had flown through explosions, and had brought a nuclear missile into alien-contaminated space without thinking twice. However, all of these actions had always been something he had done for others. Somehow, he himself had always managed to see his own death as calculated risk, something he had to live with; because it was worth dying for the ones he loved. Dying in these cases always stood in context of fighting, of fighting as Iron Man, of fighting for a cause he could advocate.

As Tony Stark, it was different. He had survived half-hearted suicide-attempts, mainly before he had reached the age of 25, but he had never been able to end it properly. All the purposefulness he had with his work was gone when it came to his own soul.

In fact, he had never really decided whether he actually wanted to live or not; and so, he had always been balancing on the edge, had coquetted with death - as long as it did not come too close.

And now, after everything he would have happily died for was gone, he felt like something left in a vacuum.
Of course he had hoped, one time or another, that perhaps the number of sleeping pills he would take on a particular day would put him to sleep for good, but in the end he had always ended up throwing up in the toilet bowl. He had stared down at the ocean for hours, unmoving, thinking about how it would feel to simply jump. More than once he had imagined how easy it would be to keep the steering wheel straight and crash through the barrier, flying directly into the waves in his shiny Bugatti.

He had never pulled it off, though.

It never felt right, something always made sure he stayed alive. Maybe to punish himself for his thoughtlessness? Or maybe because of tiny bits of beloved memories that he still had? For those times when he found a post-it with her handwriting on it between his print-outs or was suddenly hit by a hint of the scent of her perfume in the air? Maybe he was simply the pathetic coward Loki ascribed to him, choosing the least abrupt method with the minimum amount of effort needed to end his misery in the most painful and long-lasting way?

Probably. After all, it had always been that way.

These thoughts rushed through his mind while he glared at Loki, and for a second, he asked himself how long he had been silent now. What answer did this little prick expect of him? As if he would tell him his intentions, as if he would tell Loki something he couldn’t even answer for himself.

"To rip schmucks like you a new one."

It was a stupid answer and he was sure that the god would be able to deduce enough about him to know his true thoughts on the matter. Ignoring the knowing grin on the other's face, Tony shoved a chair aside and made his way to the door - which was definitely not locked - to leave the room. Maybe he could park the car somewhere less obvious. Maybe he could find a kiosk which sold some booze, just to give the trickster a wipe.

Wow, that was really the lowest level.

In the end, he didn’t.
He went as far as the space outside the front door, where cool past-midnight air greeted him with a fresh breeze. With closed eyes, his body stilled and he enjoyed the sensation on his skin. When he opened his eyes, his gaze fell on his parked car.

His name on the name-plate was not even necessary to identify the sportscar as his – there were not many people with a car like that seeking shelter in shady motels.

The desire for a glass of booze had to be put on the back burner; he had to do something about this blatant display of carelessness.
When he fell into the driver's seat with a low grunt, a noise made him halt again and turn his head to the car's glove box. A low vibrating noise from inside was audible and reminded him that he had left his mobile, with 23 unanswered calls, in the car. Okay, so there were more than a few things he should look after before he returned.

Tony found himself resorting to his somber coping-strategy of avoiding his major problems by distracting himself with smaller ones to help calm him down.

So, with a roar way too loud for the silent street, he started his engine and went off to replace the car, rummaging through the glove box to have a look at his mobile.
In the end, he had been outside for probably three quarters of an hour, and he felt better when he reluctantly returned to their room, filled with a certain pride that he had not gone looking for a 24-hour gas station.

"The car’s around the corner now, not so obviously parked. I put another 100 bucks on the reception desk, so we might leave early tomorrow without the receptionist calling the police and I could not help myself and quickly skipped through SHIELD’s protocols. They’ve got no idea what happened, but they’re more than keen to find out."

Seemingly, his voice and the clacking of the opening door had disturbed Loki from his slumber, but Tony continued without keeping his voice low, almost aggressively playing awake while he was actually tired as hell.

"If you don’t come up with a brilliant idea on where we could realize this half-baked plan of yours, I suppose I’ll buy an apartment somewhere in the city or anywhere around."

He did not know if Loki was tired, he did not exactly care either, fact was that he did not want to return to sleep just now. There was no time to sleep anyway, he felt like he had to keep in motion so that he was neither caught by SHIELD nor by any of his own negative thoughts, causing him to doubt the whole stupid endeavor.

Talking business with Loki was good, was child's play for him, a field he felt secure and did not need to be fully awake or convinced for.

Loki took in a deep breath, than rolled around, now facing him. Actually, he looked awfully tired, his long black hair sticky and his face pale. Again, the billionaire thought he looked sick, but he could not quite fathom to what extent he looked sicker than he had always done.

"We need a place to work without anyone noticing, that is the most important thing. I have to admit that I am not informed about the nature of such processes in your realm, but I think buying an apartment does sound plausible for me. Yet I wonder whether you can buy something that big without SHIELD noticing?"

The god sat up to intensify his glare at him, but a light shiver ran through his body and with a low groan Loki slowly dropped back onto the mattress, closing his eyes.

Tony had sat down in one of the chairs, watching, one eyebrow raised. At least, he was not the only one battling his own body.

When Loki spoke again, still with his eyes closed, his voice was merely an exhausted sigh.

"You should try to sleep again. You still need rest."

"Yeah, probably."

Tony answered after a while, hearing in his own voice how tired he sounded.

Yet, he did not go to sleep, but sat down on the mattress and leaned his back against the headboard, getting out his phone. The light illuminated his haggard features, but it was neither blinding nor disturbing (he had taken care of a sensible background-light-adjustment when he had built it).

He started scrolling through all kinds of vacant realties around, luckily not bound to any form of financial limit, so that he could freely choose what would suit his purposes best.

For some minutes, he could feel Loki's gaze upon the screen of the phone, but when he turned his head to ask what the god thought of a particular property, he only looked at closed eyes and slightly
parted lips, breathing evenly.

Sleeping, the emaciated, pale face with its distinct features had softened a little bit. It did not make Loki look calm, just exhausted, almost dead. If not for its breathing, the body besides him on the bed could have been a corpse.

The inventor let out a long sigh and leaned his head against the wall, still looking down at the god. Who had thought that fate would make him depend on the powers of a half-dead god, especially one that was his enemy?

Fuck, he did not even believe in fate.

There was no fate; no predetermined law ruled the universe other than cause and effect: Both of them had been thoughtless idiots who had gambled high and lost everything and now they were here.

Without looking at the ad on his phone a second time, his finger tapped on 'Close'. This was impossible – buying an apartment would draw too much attention. He had another idea, something he had almost forgotten about between the heaps of things in his possession.

There was a house he owned, a mansion to be more precise. It had once been a present from an investor, a kind of broad hint to invest in his firm as well and get some money out of real estate trading.

The topic had bored him, so he had never set foot in that house and had forgotten the man's name a few weeks later, but now, with the help of Jarvis (who answered via writing only, so that Loki's calm breathing would not be disturbed) he quickly found out where the particular neighborhood was and that there were no files about it.

Perfect. Probably too perfect to work out in the end, but better than nothing.

Tony’s eyes had already fallen shut several times and his sight started to blur, but a few minutes later, he was done and could close the browser windows. Immediately, a picture of Pepper smiled at him, striking his heart with a sharp pain. He had not thrown away or deleted anything about her, like it could keep her alive.

Stupid.

Maybe he could not make it up to her, or to himself, or to anybody, but he could at least bomb the suckers away who did it.

Tony could not stand looking at the photo any longer, yet it took him a lot of effort to put the phone away.

He fell asleep almost instantly afterward.

The hours just after dawn were always the ones that brought Tony a little bit of ease and uninterrupted sleep, so when he was disturbed by a faint touch on his side, he needed some time to come to consciousness again.

He was lying on his stomach, the reactor an uncomfortable pressure on his chest and his face buried in the pillow, which complicated breathing properly, but he had slept like a stone anyway.

With a low grumble he turned his head in the direction the sensation had come from, noticing with a sharp hiss that his neck was tensed and hurt badly from his sleeping position.

As if coming from a distance, he heard his name and he opened his dry lips, articulating an
indifferent "what?" without actually wanting to know. He just wanted to keep on lying here, not moving his limbs, or any part of his body, because right now, movement equaled pain.

However, it was too late to fall back asleep again. His body was already starting to send him unwanted information on how imaginably bad it was to rest on his wounds. Also, the voice from the distance repeated his name, now seeming a lot closer and desperate.

"Shut up. Headache."

His muttering was sour, but he opened his eyes anyway, since there was something in Loki's voice which did not please him at all.

Compared to before, the room was almost painfully bright now, which was partly their own fault, since neither of them had thought about closing the curtains last night. Together with the brightness, the room had also heated up and the air was thick with the evaporation of two grown men with more or less open wounds.

If he hadn’t felt a stinging pain in his temples already, he surely would have felt sick from the bad air.
The billionaire rolled on his back and his hand wandered over his chest to frisk his bandages, which felt okay, contrary to his shirt, which was sticky and probably smelled awfully. Then he sat up and looked over at the thing that had actually torn him out of his sleep.

"Fucking hell!"

The words blurted out without his control and his eyes widened in shock.

Loki looked horrible. The trickster was pale as a water corpse, sweat running down his forehead and leaving darkened stains on the collar of his shirt. That his hair was pure chaos was normal, but, fuck, the look in his eyes was terrifying.
Nothing smug, nothing haughty in there, only pain and panic and terrible exhaustion.

A bit lower on his violently shaking form, Tony saw the cause of Loki's misery: a thick red-yellowish discoloration of his once white shirt in the area of his stomach, indicating a huge leak of bloodied purulence out of the injury.

A wave of nausea ran through Tony’s body at the sight and left him wide awake.

"What'd you do?"

Of course he knew Loki had done nothing. Nothing, except get stabbed by a Chitauri weapon that had probably been leaking with alien blood or some poison. At the thought of it, it was insane that all what Tony had noticed from the infection raging inside Loki's body had been the paleness of his face.
These Aesir were some fucking tough guys – until they died of an alien infection.

Shit!

Tony scrambled to his feet as fast as he could, because, although it was unlikely, he could not fend off the thought that the other might actually die in front of him if he did not do anything in the next five seconds.

Fuck, what could he do? He was no fucking medic, his knowledge of the human body was only a
bit above the basics and his knowledge of Aesir physique and Alien infections tended towards zero. In this state, Loki was more of a drawback than the way to his own personal revenge and if the god died, the Tesseract would be lost forever.

Tony threw open the windows, letting in some fresh air, then he started rummaging around for the painkillers. He hastily gulped down some himself, before he brought some to the bedside, offering them in his flat hand to the god who was still lying there unmoved, eyes closed and brows knitted in agony.

"Open your mouth, against the pain," the inventor demanded without leaving much room for objections, but then realized that water might be appropriate, especially if there was fever involved - and one could practically fry eggs on Loki's forehead.

Tony raced to the bathroom and returned with a glass of water and a towel, soaking wet with ice-cold water, which he put on the other's forehead and, after a cumbersome procedure of making the god swallow a few sips together with the pills without choking on it, he dared to lift the fabric of the formerly white t-shirt. The sight made him grimace and caused another wave of nausea: those colors were definitely not meant to appear on any healthy body.

It would probably be a good idea to start with cleansing the wound, but the thought of touching it alone made his stomach turn.

Partly because he felt miserable, partly because he could not think of anything particularly intelligent to do, he simply sat down on the floor besides the bed, cross-legged, and got out his phone.

"Quick, tell me you know what this is and how to get rid of it," he mumbled, unsure whether he meant the patient or his phone, already searching through the hospital files. Since the antibiotics they had used there had not had the intended effect, it was probably not dramatic that he had none of them on hand.

God, this was bad, this was really really bad.

"Can't you just... magic it away or something? Because, honestly, I don't have the faintest idea what to do - you'll probably bite the dust if you can't give me a damn clue or something."

"I...I do not know...I've never had an infected wound. Usually they always heal without help..."

Tony had difficulties understanding the words, since Loki's voice was merely a hoarse whisper. The god could not even look at him, his exhausted body preventing him from turning his head.

Tony's pulse quickened as panic set in.

"Talk to me, Loki. Come on, give me something or I'll probably let you die."

"The remains of my magic were completely drained during the fight. It is regenerating too slowly. My overall bad condition is the cause; the healing process absorbs all of my magic...back in Asgard I had potions that helped me in such a scenario..."

Loki let out a rasping breath when he was finished talking and pulled his legs a little closer to his body. He was shivering, his whole body trembling while at the same time sweat rolled down his temples in little droplets.

Tapping on the screen of his phone in feverish haste, Tony watched, out of the corner of his eyes,
the god reach for the wet towel on his head with shaking hands, grabbed it in a weak grip and
guided it down to the throbbing wound, in an futile attempt to clean his stomach.
Somehow, his movements died down somewhere on the way and he simply kept it there.

"I need some ice... or cold water... please."

Tony let out another curse and got up again, the pleading tone in the god's voice almost making
him jump. His own pain was still immanent in every movement he made, yet it stepped into the
background at the moment.

He returned to the small and overall pretty ugly bathroom, grabbed every towel and sheet he could
find, threw them in the bathtub and let cold water soak them. If the god would at least be able to
get up, he could simply bath him in the ice-cold water, but he knew that the man was way heavier
than his thin figure would suggest and without the suit there was no way for Tony to carry him
anywhere.

So, no. Fuck.

The suit - maybe he could get the suit and bring Loki away from here?
But no, there was no destination promising any treatment which might improve his health.
Also, they would have to leave everything he got in the car behind and - which was the most
annoying part - it would be similar to running naked through the streets with a big blinking light-
bolt pointed to his head, begging for SHIELD to find them.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

The genius, not living up to this entitlement right now, returned to the god with the dripping
towels, leaving a wet trail on the floor.

"Here, don't remove these."

God, he was awful in caring for living creatures.
He did not know how to achieve the voice-level where one sounded all soothing and comforting or
how to touch people right so they would feel safe and well-treated.
He needed something to take apart, to fully understand, which did not scream or have to endure
pain - there was no fucking anti-virus software he could write for alien-fever.

Thinking of which, there was still a faint hope.

A really, really faint hope which he refused to think about the whole time, but the situation being as
desperate as it was right now, he had to consider it.

Not listening to the silent whimpers coming from the trickster, Tony fell into a chair, only now
realizing how exhausting this stressful situation was.
He picked up his phone again, throwing glances at the bed every two seconds.
There was a hot tear running down from the corner of Loki's eye, mixing with the sweat. Tony did
not want to imagine how painful this shit had to be - if he started to get all compassionate about his
partner of convenience, then he would lose general view, control, and maybe Loki's life and, with
it, the Tesseract.

Yes, this was all about the Tesseract, this was his little ticket for payback and he would not let it
slip through his fingers - even if it meant making compromises. He had picked himself up for this;
he would not allow it to end before he had a chance to prove anything.
In the back of his mind, a lurking fear had lodged itself, getting louder every time he thought about
the emptiness which would follow if this project failed.

With the swift movements of his fingers, he had found the name he was looking for and pressed the call button.

He was not even sure if Bruce had kept the phone Tony had given him, but if the man had even a shred of loyalty within him, he would have.

"Come on, answer..." Tony muttered while the distorted tooting noise told him that he was now calling the other end of the world.

Chapter End Notes

Something like that had to be expected... sorry for the cliffhanger xD

Kudos and especially comments are highly appreciated!

Thanks to our Beta Yue1234 :)
"Banner here."

"Damn right you are," Tony answered, keeping his voice decidedly grim. He could not refrain from sounding at least a little bit relieved however - he did not know what he would have done if nobody had answered the phone.

There was little to deduce about Bruce's condition or mood from his two word greeting; only a slight tightness to his voice had clued Tony in to the fact that the doctor was somewhat tense.

Served him right.

"Okay, listen, hypothetical question: What do I do to treat a wound infected with some unknown alien-virus? The, uh, patient is already feverish and has tremendous pain. Common antibiotics have turned out to be useless, and no, there is no way of going to a hospital or calling a doctor. There's a reason I called you of all people."

The inventor tapped the table nervously with his fingers while he tried to give Bruce sufficient information about Loki’s injury without indicating what kind of situation he and the god were in. He knew that if he had to tell somebody, Bruce would be at the top of his list, but he refused to lay his faith completely in the doctor's hands after everything that had happened.

The surprised silence that met Tony's words on the other end of the phone may have been caused by the slow satellite-connection, but it still made the inventor all jittery.

"Purely hypothetical, nothing of your concern - but urgent, really urgent. Just need some medical advice. You'll be able to continue playing big-fat-green-mother Teresa in a few minutes."

He was close to yelling at Loki to shut up; the god’s whimpering and shifting in the sheets made it hard to concentrate.

"Infection from a Chitauri-Attack?"

The doctor asked after a few seconds, sounding professional, almost impersonal, and Tony sent back confirmation in the form of a hum, his eyes lingering on Loki.

"Okay, the antibiotics don’t work because they only affect the bacteria inhabiting our planet, not the ones of alien origin. I will be honest to you,” he paused for a moment and Tony realized he was holding his breath, “if the patient is already in the state you described, the likelihood of survival is very small.”

“Keep the patient as warm as possible and get the wound disinfected, pour a large amount of disinfectant over and into the wound, don't be surprised if the sore areas appear negatively affected at first. That particular virus mostly affects the areas where the wounds are. Use alcoholic beverages if you don't have something else at hand, it kills even alien bacteria. And be sure to keep the patient from falling unconscious until you’re absolutely sure that the fever is descending. Keep the patient responsive."

That was definitely not good news.
Tony bit his lower lip, thinking feverishly, and threw a glance over towards Loki. The god may have a higher durability than any mortal, but he had been suffering from the virus for several days already. Even though the progress of disease may be slowed down, it did progress all the same.

"Okay, warmth and alcohol," Tony repeated in a monotone, still thinking, and got up from his chair to close the window and take away the god's cold, wet cloths.

The noise of disapproval coming from Loki at least indicated that the god was still somewhat conscious, although he still looked like shit. While Tony preformed these easiest of tasks (they had neither alcohol nor proper disinfectants on hand) he began thinking beyond his and Loki's current situation.

The plan had been to leave this hotel at dawn, now it was already past 10 - they could not wait much longer.

Even if Loki would get better by just waiting the fever out, that was no longer an option. The engineer cursed silently, trying to get the shirt off Loki's body one-handedly so he could have better access to the wound while he still had the phone pressed against his ear.

Back to Bruce, now sounding a lot more insistent, he added:

"This is not enough, Bruce, there's no time for a long recovery-period. He doesn't have to be fully healed; he just needs to not die! If he dies, it would suck. Like, really, really suck. I can't afford his death. Would it change anything if I told you that the patient isn’t human?"

It was risky to tell Bruce more details, but it was necessary; the more detailed the information, the better the diagnosis.

There was another surprised silence at the other end of the line, making the low noise of the satellite-connection static even louder than before.

On Tony's side, Loki coughed pathetically.

"If you, by 'not human', mean something stronger, like a supersoldier or an Asgardian for example, it is, of course, an advantage; but I still lack the relevant information needed for this case to make the right assumptions. As far as I know, the physiques of said groups are relatively close to that of a human’s, the treatment stays the same."

Bruce's answer came in a dry tone, much like back when he and Tony had been having scientific discussions until late at night. It could sound a little heartless, but Tony was thankful for some distanced professionalism here.

"You could make it a lot easier for me if you would just tell me who we are talking about."

Tony was bent over Loki again, looking at his pale face, a face which looked more unconscious than conscious, with a sorrowful frown.

Experimentally, he slapped the pale face with the back of his hand, satisfied with the reaction he got when Loki's eyes opened wide in shock.

"You heard the man? Don't you dare doze off. It means dying. Dying sucks. I dare you to die like this."

Tony stayed a few seconds in his position, observing Loki's eye-movements, then he nodded at him affirmatively, as if they had made a deal that dying was not an option today.
Turning away from the bed, Tony looked around the room. Maybe they could realize the disinfection-thing after all- ah, yes, there it was, hidden under an award-winningly ugly sideboard: the mini-bar.

A shame that he had not found the sanctuary of alcohol during the night, instead of stumbling through the empty hotel-hallways, he would've just enjoyed a drink or two and sleep would've been a much more comfortable thing.

He really hoped there would be more than just beer and M&Ms inside, he knew the stuff they needed had to be as high in alcohol content as possible. The movement he had made to perch in front of the small fridge must have been too fast, for his balance almost got lost and his whole body protested against it with a rush of pain; but he managed to get a hold on to the wooden sideboard and then open the door.

"Ouch, fuck," he muttered, grimacing at the stinging in his sides.

"Daniels or Smirnoff?" he asked into the phone, then decided himself to pick the vodka, since he himself was more of a whiskey-type. With the bottle in his hand, he frowned for a second over the excellent selection of booze provided by such a shabby hotel (maybe it only seemed shabby for a person used to residing in five-star hotels), then got up again - another wave of dizziness making him halt for a second - to get back to the bed.

"What do I do with it? Simply pour it over the wound or what? All of it?"

There was a rather annoying silence at the other end of the phone and the billionaire realized he had not answered Bruce's last question, but god, telling would entail such a shitload of other explanations that Tony didn't have the time nor the energy to deal with.

"C'mon Banner, stay professional."

Another five seconds of silence gave Tony enough permission to simply do what he thought would be best. Without putting the phone down, he opened the vodka bottle's screw-cap with his teeth, looking over towards Loki, who was staring at him with glassy eyes, before he started pouring half of the bottle's content over the god's wound.

The scream that escaped Loki's mouth almost made Tony drop the bottle and the inventor could barely finish his work because of the god's sudden squirming and twisting. He let out an annoyed hiss and stepped back a few inches to put the bottle onto the nightstand and to find something to gag the heavily panting god.

They did not need suspicious neighbors sending for the police because of strange screams coming from a hotel-room.

"Lay still, for fuck's sake, here, bite on that."

A piece of stray cloth was shoved roughly into Loki’s mouth while Bruce almost yelled at Tony, demanding to know whose cry that had been and that the inventor should just tell him what this was about.

Tony was close to throwing the phone at the wall - he had a talent for multitasking, but for now the coordination needed to breathe, walk, and think was enough multitasking for him, so he really didn’t need a voice yelling in his ear while a god simultaneously struggled with death.

"It's Loki, okay? I'm trying to keep Loki, the guy who led the Chitauri to earth, alive, because he has the fucking Tesseract and I need that thing. That enough information to do a detailed diagnosis?!"
With his hand still pressed onto Loki’s chest to prevent the god from tossing around too bad, Tony eventually snarled the answer into the phone without thinking, having had enough of the craziness that surrounded him.
He barely registered the startled silence this time, since he had other things to occupy his mind and hands. He was just glad when Bruce spoke again.

"Okay, listen, you need to be sure that you disinfect the complete wound, not only the surface, use all of the alcohol. If it is Loki, he will survive it."

The assurance that Loki would survive this sent some new energy through Tony's body.
He allowed himself to take a deep breath, than he grabbed the bottle and leaped onto Loki’s body as a more effective method of holding the god’s kicking legs down.
Loki's struggling increased, but he was weak and the billionaire had no actual problem getting hold of the god’s unbroken wrist to press it into the mattress.

Ignoring every thought about the pain he might inflict, Tony pressed the bottle against the small opening in Loki's abdomen, watching the liquid rush inside the infected wound.
The god's whole body tensed in agony, his scream barely muffled by the cloth that gagged him, and the contorted expression of his face burning itself into Tony's mind.

Tony did not allow himself to close his eyes and, even when the bottle was completely emptied, he did not let go of Loki, but fixed him merciless onto the mattress, taking away all the opportunities that the dying god had to move.

When the movements under him slowly died down, the inventor loosened his grip - the phone had fallen on the mattress some time during the procedure - and leaned back a little to observe the panting god.

Loki’s whole body had gone limp, sweat pouring down his skin in small droplets, dampening the sheets beneath him.
Finally, the god seemed bereft of all the powers left within him, it was a terrifying sight.

A steady trickle of unidentifiable liquids - something which looked like blood, maybe some pus, Tony did not really wanted to know anyway - seeped out of the open sore, but when Tony looked up, the god returned his gaze.
His eyes were still glassy, but seemed clearer, brighter than before. But maybe that was only the inventor’s imagination.

Tony let out an exhausted grunt: Shit, this had been tiring!

Now that it was quiet, he felt his muscles ache and his whole body protest against any further movement. The inventor swished his tongue over his dry lips and closed his mouth, trying to get his own breathing under control again before he started fumbling in the sheets to find the phone.

Somehow he was sure the god would probably tear his face off for doing this to him if he was in a conscious state of mind, but right now, he seemed more likely to faint rather than do anything to the man who might have just saved his life with a bottle of vodka.

"Please tell me I don't need to repeat this procedure every hour… or ever again for that matter. That was fucking terrifying."
He was more gasping than speaking into the phone, unsure whether Bruce was still on the line or not, and got to his feet, not releasing his grip on the bed until he was standing safely, his vision already starting to blur again.
It had been a few hours since he had eaten anything, not to mention gotten a drink of water.

He walked over to the bedside, bent over Loki’s face, and removed the cloth so that the god could breathe properly again before he used the cloth’s clean side to wipe the sweat and tears from Loki’s forehead and cheeks.

"Still there?" he asked in a low tone, his mouth close to the god’s ear and was satisfied with the faint nod he received as an answer.

Okay, he really wanted this to be over now, because if not, Bruce would soon start asking questions and Tony just wanted to take a shower, drink a whole bottle crate of water, and close his eyes for a few minutes - preferably in a place which was not all scrambled sheets and blood and sweat and pus and spilled alcohol (which was funny because it resembled his own lifestyle from only weeks before quite well).

The sight was more than traumatic if one dared to think about it and he was once again sure he had seen enough blood and death for his lifetime.
Instead of deadening his disgust, it became more and more intensive with every occasion.

"Any other advice?"

He went on speaker-phone, already on the way to the bathroom, before he opened the water tap and splashed some of the liquid onto his face.

"Yes, don't do anything stupid. I don't know how you ended up in this situation and I am not sure if it was wise to tell me, but I hope you have some idea what you’re doing. If I were you, I would hand Loki over to SHIELD and..." 

Tony hung up before Bruce could end his sentence.

Silence filled the hotel room for the next few minutes.
Tony drank water from his hands, then stuffed himself with some chocolate bars from the mini bar before he started tidying up the mess with automatized movements.
After the mess was more or less gone, he cleaned Loki’s abdomen with a lot of paper towels, gave the god some fresh water, and placed the blanket over him in a manner that could almost be misunderstood as gentle.

God, he was so tired he actually winced when Loki suddenly spoke to him, so quiet that he had almost missed the noise.

"Thank you."

The god seemed to put all of his strength into those two words, still they were nothing more than a whisper, barely audible, even in the totally silent room.

"Yeah, just don't get sentimental."

Tony sat back in one of the chairs with his eyes closed.
Sighing, he ran his hands over his face and through his hair before he opened his eyes again and looked over at the god.

Only now, after the imminent danger was gone, did he slowly start seeing the whole picture again, the whole mess they were in right now, without even having gotten to their destination.

The fact that he had just saved a life had not really gotten through to him - somehow, he could not
muster the euphoria to jump for joy.

Now that Loki’s health was somewhat restored - and that was not promising to last long - they were back at their crappy starting position, only now there was another person who knew about their plans and so was a possible security risk.

Even an optimist would see that the outlook for this endeavor was spiraling toward disastrous.

"I'm taking a shower. Please don't consider dying while I'm out of the room."

He did as he said, taking a handful of painkillers first, since his headache and his annoying spiral of frustrating thoughts had returned due to the fact that the adrenaline that had been fueling his actions had now faded.

Just why did he succeed in saving Loki’s life, the life of his enemy, of a man - not even a man, a fucking alien to be precise - he barely knew and hardly liked instead of being there at the right moment when it came to the woman he loved?

Being a realist, he had not even had a god to blame, or fate, only himself for choosing so badly.

When the first splash of hot water hit his face, he tried to let the futile thoughts wash away with it and grant his head a break.

It did work to a certain degree and for a few minutes he found himself simply enjoying the hot water on his tensed muscles without wrapping his mind around anything. Only when he stepped out of the shower - at least it was a shower this time and not a fucking bath-tub – did he realize he had no fresh clothing available and so he got his jeans back on, giving the stained t-shirt a disgusted look.

One good thing, considering his miserable condition, was that he felt everyday movements getting smoother and easier to perform again with every step he made (although he was pretty sure he would still have problems with a bath tub).

Feeling clean at last, he remembered his hunger.

"Care for a McBreakfast?"

He stepped out of the bathroom again, finding Loki still alive and lying on the bed unmoved.

The god was even awake enough to frown at the phrase and Tony could not hold the corners of his mouth back from twitching up into a small smile. Now that the mad scramble to save Loki was over, he could look at the room from a relaxed distance and allow something like relief to wash over his body.

Tony thanked nature for granting the human brain happiness-hormones.

"It’s like a usual breakfast, only made in the deep fryers of hell aka McDonalds. I won't blame you if you aren't interested, but I’m starving. I'll bring some disinfectants, the real deal from the pharmacy. I just need to get out of here for a few minutes - and, uh, some clothes."

"Clothes would be good."

Loki kept his eyes closed, but he sounded much better, his voice now low and incomparable to the hoarse whisper from before.

“Yeah, I'll see what I can do.”

"Could you bring me some honey? I want to be cautious with solid food as long as I am... like this, but starving myself further doesn’t seem like a good option."
Tony just nodded at Loki, who was finally looking at him. Even though the god knew he had to be cautious, the fact that he seemed to need food again gave Tony back some of his hope. As quietly as possible, the inventor slid out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Of course it had aroused some attention when he had alighted from his expensive looking car, wearing no shoes and only a pair of jeans and a muscle-shirt he had found in the backseat. He had restricted himself to a small kiosk, still he was sure he had made an unforgettable impression on the employees (there was no chance of hiding his glowing reactor from anyone, but he hoped the $100 cash extra would ensure the cashier’s discretion).

At least he had some stuff now, including the keys to the building he had bought and had still not seen in real life, and a pair of sunglasses, dark sunglasses which would hide his blood-shot eyes from the world.
Doped up on painkillers, munching his now second BicMac, from time to time sipping from a coke, he almost felt good, physically of course.
He had put the contents of the hotel’s mini-bar in the car trunk while Loki had been sleeping.

Just in case, just to sleep better, or, at all.

When he turned around to check whether the god was still sleeping, he found him looking at him. Even though he was still chalk-white, Loki looked better now. His eyes, tired and heavy from sleep, seemed to be clearer than before, the incoming sunshine making their irises look almost like arctic ice.

"Here."

The inventor threw a tube of honey onto the mattress beside Loki’s body and grabbed himself another handful of french fries.

"There are some clothes, I guessed your size," he pointed towards a heap of clothes on his left, mouth still full.

During their precipitous escape and their rather dramatic morning, time had moved twice as fast as usual, which had given neither of them enough space to think about what their plan implied, or have any thoughts more complex than deciding where to sleep.

Now, everything seemed to have slowed down, not proceeding quickly enough for Tony's liking.

A bit of rest was okay, greatly appreciated actually, but he found himself wondering what it would be like, living so close together with Loki for an uncertain amount of time - if this was going to work out at all.
After all, they had been sleeping in the same bed.
He had not wasted a thought on it yesterday night and he really was neither touchy nor picky, but given the fact that he knew nothing about the god other than that he had once fought him for a good reason.
There had never been a person he had wanted to be the first thing he saw in the morning, except one, but the situation being what it was, it was Loki now. At least their purpose was big enough to excuse Tony being dependent on a maniac Norse god and perhaps Loki would turn out not to be a dickhead when he was on the same side as a human.
Still, Tony doubted that.

Absent-mindedly chewing his fries, he felt tiredness overcome him again and, with it, a
comfortable indifference. There was only one thing he needed to get off his chest.

"You're aware of the fact that Banner knows now? Right before I hung up, he suggested bringing you to SHIELD. I don't know whether he'll do anything, but the possibility is there."

"But Banner is far away, as you said, and I am pretty sure he will make no attempts to hand me... us over to SHIELD. Even if that is his intention, what new information could he provide to them? They already know that we escaped together, as long as you did not mention something about our current location, I do not see a reason why our situation should have changed."

Speaking seemed to exhaust Loki, Tony watched him close his eyes and sigh deeply after his words, just to grope blindly over the mattress a second later, his fingers eventually closing around the plastic tube full of honey. He opened it and directed it to his mouth, but thankfully he came to the conclusion that it would likely induce a cough attack if he ate in a lying position in his condition.

The tube was again dropped onto the mattress and Loki placed his hands against the soft surface, pushing his upper body up into a sitting position. Tony watched, silently munching his fries, how it took him several minutes to arrange his chest in a way that could be considered vertical. Loki did not ask the inventor for help and Tony was benevolent enough to refrain from making any mocking comments.

It took the god over half an hour to empty a huge part of the bottle, evidently savoring every sip he got of the aromatic fluid, and, if not for his general tiredness, Tony would've found the fact that it was possible to eat a whole bottle of honey without throwing up more disturbing than he did right now, but at least it looked like Loki was no longer dying.

Eventually, the billionaire blinked rapidly a few times, realizing he had been staring into nothingness for minutes now with his eyelids becoming heavier and heavier.

"I'm, uh, going to try to get some sleep."

There was nothing else he could do right now; they were condemned to waiting a few hours at minimum and, even though he knew the thought was illusionary, he really wished to have some undisturbed sleep for just two hours straight.

His insomnia had always not been problem, since most of the time his body and mind had seemed to run on nearly inexhaustible batteries, but lately, it had turned against him. He always felt too tired to sleep, dozing off while he was doing something and lying awake for hours when he put his body to rest in a proper bed - that was what he had to cope with now.

Tony got up from the chair, starting to gather the filthy sheets together and throwing them on the floor before sinking onto the mattress with a low groan. He tried to blind out the other person's presence behind his back, which, after a while, worked pretty well.

Not calling the whole scenario awkward seemed to be the most successful way to make it seem less strange and uncomfortable.

Even though it pissed him off sometimes, it was a good idea for him to have someone around who judged what he did and demanded him to be physically fit as well as mentally prepared – it made him even recognize his body's need for sleep and actually act according to it for once.

Just when he felt his thoughts starting to drift away, revolving around the latest events, people's faces, and all the worries on his mind, a sudden jolt rushed through his body, making him jerk and
become wide awake again in a second. He didn't even know what the image or the feeling had been which had torn him out of his sleep, but he hated it when that happened.

Letting out a frustrated moan he rolled himself onto his back, blinking a few times, before a look at the clock told him that he'd actually been sleeping for at least three hours - it felt like he had not been lying here longer than five minutes.

“Gorgeous...”

The billionaire screwed his face up and yawned, peering to his side to see if Loki was awake and maybe ready to finally leave this room. Indeed he was awake, looking at Tony a bit startled, probably awakened by him.

Tony felt the urge to say something.

"We need to go. I can't stand this room any longer."

He sat up, clenching his teeth together at the traction in his chest, and rubbed his hand over his face before almost automatically picking up the package of painkillers he had put on the bedside table. When he had swallowed another two of them, he looked down at Loki again, who still had his eyes on him.

Tony knitted his brows questioning and then took a shot in the dark, just to say something.

"Sorry. I have trouble sleeping. There are separate bedrooms where we're going."

"You have been...talking."

Wow, big surprise. Tony bit his lip, waiting for the next comment, but instead of mentioning further details, Loki firmly glanced around the room, seeming to notice now that it was totally dark outside.

"It is a good time to leave. I hope that I will be able to... get out of this bed."

The god smiled numbly, but the expression faded as fast as it had come and he averted his gaze from Tony's serious and tired expression.

Tony merely nodded, quite thankful actually, then stood up, running his hand through his hair to bring some order to the mess, and then turned around to see the other still sitting on the edge of the bed, obviously unsure how to go about getting up.

Tony snorted, pressing his lips together and shaking his head a bit before he wordlessly walked around the bed to aid the god in his understandably difficult quest.

An official agreement on nonverbal communication seemed to have been established between them, the only consequent syllogism for the present situation of two men stuck together, whose misery surpassed each other only in their inability to accept help.

The inventor really was thankful that for once, the person he was with did not feel the desire to play his psychiatrist and make him face his problems by verbalizing them. He had no idea what had happened to Loki exactly, but he remembers his desperate cry when he had told him about Thor.

Had that really been more than a week ago?

He had a feeling, just a hint of an impression, that to some degree Loki comprehended his pain. Well, maybe not his pain, but maybe just pain in general- at least he acted like it and didn’t just babbled words of condolence and support.
"Wait," Tony got one of the pairs of trousers lying on the heap he had bought and handed them to Loki, then he started collecting the other stuff which was still spread all around the room, so that the god had time to get that piece of clothing on. It took an awful lot of time, but Tony would not help the god into his pants.

Tony imagined the scream of the cleaning woman when she’d come in to the room after its residents had left - it looked like somebody had died here, or maybe like a woman had given birth or something - hard to tell, both these ideas were plausible.

"Lay your arm around my shoulder," Tony ordered when Loki was ready, "it will suck if you break your neck falling after you survived the alien-fever."

Their walk was at a snail’s pace, unnervingly slow and even more uncomfortable when Tony thought that there was the faint possibility of being seen by somebody. Nevertheless, they managed, even though Loki's weight felt like Tony was carrying a sack of spuds on his shoulder.

The forced closeness they shared, the heavy breathing beside of him, sounding even louder in the silence of the night, did not unsettle the inventor, though. It was necessary; therefore there was no reason to complain.

"There we are," he eventually said after they had made it outside. He helped the god get into the kiosk’s passenger seat before he himself got in the driver's seat, slotting the key into the ignition once he was settled.

With the tip of a finger he turned on the GPS and programmed it via his voice to guide them to their destination.

Chapter End Notes

I know, this is not medically accurate, but it's an alien-virus, okay? :D

Thank you a lot for reading and don't forget to give a kudos if you like the story :)
Shelter

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki find a place to stay.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite Stark's attempts to start the car quietly, the engine roared loudly when he turned the key, as if the car was welcoming them back, and they finally left the extinct streets of the district their hotel had been in.

After they had passed some of the indistinguishable streets, Loki realized he did not know where exactly they were even going. He merely remembered Stark mentioning that they were heading into another region of the city, one occupied by the wealthier part of the population. The man had said something about a neighborhood with big mansions, luxurious, yet nothing special.

Midgardians seemed to have a strange attitude towards anonymity, from everything Loki had learned so far. Families preferred to stay on their own and did not care for the ones living right beside them. It was a concept Loki could relate to, but still far away from what he had been grown up with. It was common that every inhabitant of an Asgardian city knew at least several dozen other families - necessary in a world where older family members still decided to where and whom their youngest should be wed to.

Not that banalities like this held any more value.

Their drive was not longer than half an hour, spent in a pleasurable silence, until they saw the first mansions appear in a long row, all windows dark and dead, everybody asleep.

"It's with an underground level, I need some space to work. That's the thing that's important, but the house has not been used for years so I can't guarantee for furniture or stuff like that. There should be electricity and running water, though."

Stark's voice broke the silence, sounding distracted as he was searching for the right house while driving.

When the number they were looking for appeared to their right, he pulled the car over and with a quick press on the button of a remote which seemed attached to the keys, a huge door opened and the suspicious car disappeared inside a cave-like room.

When the engine was turned off, the room seemed unnaturally dark filled with a thick silence.

Now that they were finally where they had been heading for all the time, neither of them made a move to leave the car.

"Is this even real? I mean, is it me, or does all of this feel like one of these dreams you don't wake up from, even though you want to. This thought really fucks me up..."
Loki could barely see the mortal's silhouette in the darkness, but his eyes were adjusting quickly. Stark rubbed a hand through his face, seemingly expecting an answer, then he pulled the keys of the car.

"I could slap you in the face to prove the reality of this situation to you, but I guess affirming it with my words will be sufficient. Unless you like a little pain."

He was already a little absent-minded when he answered, since he was curiously glancing out of the machine.

To his great disappointment, the walls inside the garage were gray and blank, though Loki was not exactly sure what he had expected in a location like this. Hopefully the house inside would look different.

It was a hard task to get out of the car and up into the house via small stairs, but this time Loki managed to walk on his own, still clinging to the wall, yet at least without the help of the other man.

Stark had already darted off again and made his way up into the actual house.

Once the infection was cleared out of his body, Loki's regeneration advanced with every minute. It was a strange feeling, being thankful to a human - a creature he had his whole life believed to be under his dignity - who had not only saved his life, but also was the one Loki's life depended on.

Fate was truly taking a weird, unexpected path.

Once arrived in the actual house, the inevitable exhaustion began to settle in, making his muscles ache in protest. Loki slumped against the next wall, slowly sinking to the ground, trying to control his breathing.

He might be able to walk again - a huge improvement if he considered his state only 24 hours before - but his strength was still extremely limited.

At least he could use the time he had to spend regenerating by taking in his new surroundings, the place he would hopefully be living in for the next...weeks? Months?

Though obviously deserted for a long time, the house itself actually looked appealing inside, from what Loki could make out in the dim streetlights shining though the huge windows.

The walls looked clean and were held entirely in white; the floor was covered in dark wood with a tinge of warm color in it. Loki was sure it would have a slightly reddish or orange tone, once illuminated by direct sunlight.

However, there was no furniture. Generally, it was not the house itself, but the overall emptiness that could be considered a problem here.

The god had not expected luxury in their new home (something that sounded still pretty strange to him: 'their home' - a god living together with a mortal!), yet the realization that they did not even had a bed, neither some blankets to arrange a temporary sleeping place was a little upsetting.

"Where do I sleep?", the god asked as soon as Stark came in earshot.

"Fuck, what do you ask me? I've been here for the exact same three minutes as you have."
Loki was sitting on the floor, half asleep, when footsteps from the stairs announced Stark's return.

"It'll be sufficient. It's not 'Beautiful Living' or anything, but I had worse.", the human reported while passing by again, waking the slumbering god entirely.

Loki lifted his head, a bit disoriented, and blinked at the spot where he could make out the mortal.

The man had stopped his movements, looking down on Loki with a frown.

"You okay?"

He did not wait for an answer, though, and made his way over to the windows to close the curtain, clouding the room in even thicker darkness.

Just the right amount of light to continue sleeping – Loki felt like his limbs were made of lead.

That plan did not work out, though.

The god may have felt exhausted and tired, but the constant sound of footsteps, the quiet mumbling and rustling emitting from the mortal was making him nervous and made every attempt to sleep futile.

He still kept his eyes closed, trying to meditate and calm his senses. It did not help at all.

The next time he heard Stark approaching, Loki opened his eyes, watching the mortal approach with his arms stuffed full with the goods from the car's trunk, passing the god another time without deigning to look at Loki.

It was tempting to yell at the mortal and tell him to be silent; but as long as he was actually doing something that was necessary Loki had no right to complain and would have to endure the noise.

Stark approached anew, this time something unexpected happened - instead of passing him, he finally seemed to have made enough noise and let himself slump down at Loki's; yet only when the other was sitting, the god spotted the bottle of booze in his hand.

Loki opened his mouth, attempting to object to this change of events. He had made pretty clear what he thought about Stark's alcohol consumption, but the mortal spoke faster.

"Shut it, Loki."

He took a quick gulp afterward as if to confirm his determination.

Loki hesitated a moment while his mind was processing if he should allow the human this impudence towards him, but he came to the conclusion that he did not have pretty much of a
choice. What might he do?
Slap the bottle out of Stark's hands? It would only earn him a fist in the face and an even worse mood, maybe some cuts on his feet if the bottle was broken.
Trying to persuade him to stop the drinking? Useless.

The human coughed one time, having taken the first gulp to greedily, yet took another sip, before he offered the bottle to Loki.

"Here."

As if he was trying to make a sort of a peace offer, a thank-you, a toast for their (non existing) success, appeasement and a way of expressing his willingness to make this thing between them work.

Loki hesitated only shortly.

He accepted the bottle, deciding to take the easier way one time in his life, took a few sips of the dark golden liquid. It pleasantly burned in his throat and the way down, heating him up from inside.

Fate was indeed a strange thing.
Here he was, a half-dead god dressed in rags beside an equally messed up mortal, drinking away their worries in the others company.

"I can praise myself with the fact that I am always planning forward and calculate dozens of different outcomes for my plans. But this is indeed pretty unexpected."

Loki said after a few moments of silence and took another sip, shuddered at the disgusting taste and handed it back over to Stark.

The god closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the wall again and sighed in exhaustion.

Though he was weary and had merely the strength left to walk, he knew that he had to take a shower before he could get into the bed, Stark would make sure of that.
He was still covered in his own blood and the dried remains of pus, an almost unendurable state for someone who had always taken hygiene very seriously.

Damn, he did not even know how the human could stand his presence right now - Loki had not showered for months (sometimes he had jumped into a lake or river if the time had allowed it, but that could not actually be described as cleaning). His hair, uncombed for what felt like ages, was still sticky from sweat, half-rotten Chitauri blood and he was sure that his infectious wounds were also not pleasant to anyone.

Maybe Stark had lived enough time surrounded by his own rotten food and became resistant against every kind of smell.

Still, a shower was obligatory - right now.

"If you excuse me. I will go shower myself and retire for the night."

Loki's muscles tensed in reluctance as he got hold of the wall and worked himself upwards, until he was standing on two severely shaking legs.
The god swayed a little and almost feared to fall back onto the ground, what he did, only a couple of feed away from the human. He just managed to get one hand on the wall to keep his head from crashing into it, but nevertheless he was back on the floor, his legs totally limp and the muscles in
his arms shivering to keep the heavy body in an upward position.

"Nevermind, would you just get me a blanket? I will sleep here."

Loki could not completely hide how much it unsettled him, the weakness, lack of strength, total
dependence on the other man. He would not walk anywhere anymore, not today, and Stark did not
have the strength to carry him.

Humiliation at its finest.

Yet fortunately, the mortal did not comment on it, merely set the bottle aside, got up from his
sitting position and walked past the god, slightly staggering, but still able to walk the stairs without
tripping.
He came back with a blanket, which radiated the smell of dust and strange chemicals.

"The best I found. I'll empty the car, you can take the clothing as a pillow. Like one of these
boycout-trips, isn't it? Haven't been on them, but still.
Rogers would be dancing from joy when he'd see us. He'd probably make us some marshmallows
or something."

Loki abstained from commenting Stark's rambling, just wrapped himself into the blanket. He
barely noticed the other disappearing again to get said clothes, he was already asleep as soon as he
was in a horizontal position.

Stark was back at his side a moment later, throwing the mentioned clothes carelessly on Loki, who
 lazily reached for them and started rearranging the fabrics into something he could his head rest
on.

"See you tomorrow.", was the last thing he heard Stark saying, before the mortal disappeared
upstairs.

It took Loki more than a minute to notice, that the mortal had forgotten his booze.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the rather short and boring chapter, as well as the rare updates.
Unfortunately, my friend is rather busy at the moment and therefore we can't get more
than one chapter done each week.
But it will get better during the middle of July, my friend will have Semester break
and I will also have more free time, and we really hope to get two, maybe three
chapters done every week.
Thank you for your patience!

Every kind of feedback is appreciated!
Tony and Loki are forced to leave the house, but that decision turns out to be even more risky than anticipated.

Tony woke up way too early the next morning, the bright sunlight burning his tired eyes and reminding him that he had forgotten to close the curtains last night. Yet, he did not move an inch from the bed; not to close the curtains nor to actually get up and do something and he only opened his eyes when he heard the tapping of naked feet on the floor.

A second later, Loki entered the room.

Hair still damp and cheeks flushed, it was easy to deduce that the god had finally made his way into a shower. Since Loki wore no shirt, Tony's gaze involuntarily drifted to the god’s abdomen where his wound was still an angry red gash while his other wounds already had fresh pink scar tissue covering them. The missing piece of his shoulder had not completely regrown yet, but the wound was already covered in a layer of new cells, which would soon completely replace the missing ones.

"You found the shower," Tony eventually said, voice still hoarse from having fallen asleep drunk the night before.

Although he seemed to have scrubbed layers of dirt from his skin, Loki still did not look well at all, not even the hint of color in his cheeks could hide the fact that he was far from his optimum condition.

Tony knew he should stop staring, but his mind was still slowed down and, geez, the god looked like one of those scary-as-fuck pictures people popped into the end of Youtube videos to make you shit your pants - okay, he himself probably did not look much better. Bet children would start crying if they saw him like this.

All in all, they contrasted the warm, friendly atmosphere of the room quite well. It was a beautiful room; half of it slightly circular with huge wooden window frames as well as skirting that was decorated with ornaments. However, it wasn’t to Tony's taste.

"Clothes are behind that door, pick yourself out something pretty."

The unasked question for that answer was not hard to guess and the performance of Tony’s suggested task would hopefully take the trickster a few minutes, buying some time for Tony to pretend he did not have to leave the bed.

While Loki left his bedside wordlessly to vanish into the walk-in closet, the inventor could not help but think about Pepper.
Not that he wanted her inside his head, but she would just not leave. It was so easy imagining her in this house, now that it was not dark anymore. The building was obviously more to her taste than it was to Tony's.

She'd walk around, wearing nothing but panties and one of his old t-shirts, and get him out of bed when he had already slept in, scolding him while she simultaneously handed him his coffee and straighten his tie. She'd have that look on her face, the same look she always had when he had done something immature again, with one corner of her lips twitched up into a small smirk that which always revealed that she actually loved him for being immature.

The engineer blinked a few times, refocusing his gaze which had drifted into the distance, and remembered there was no Pepper here, nor would there ever be.

There was just Loki, wearing some surprisingly well fitting jeans and a t-shirt, who was coming out of the closet again and thankfully not noticing how far away his new partner’s thoughts had roamed.

For a second, Loki's mere presence filled Tony with anger, the fact that the god was there, alive and breathing, instead of her, instead of his Pepper who hadn’t deserved the ending she had been handed; but Tony's anger was futile and pointless, making it even more frustrating. Goddamnit, that persistence, nerve-wrecking migraine was coming back; he could feel the distant stinging that promised to make his mood worse.

He really needed to get up before he threw anything at the god, whether it be insults or something heavy and skull-crushing.

He let out a sharp, angry hiss and left the bed and room almost hastily, grabbing his pack of painkillers in the bathroom and splashing some cold water onto his face. His stomach felt like a black hole and, besides the latent nausea, he felt an incredible hunger, although he had no real appetite.

However, the prospect of sweets and chips, the only foods they possessed, was not appealing in the slightest. Tony could not actually remember when he had last bought food at a supermarket and he didn’t have the slightest desire to refresh that memory by going out and buying some decent food. But there were a lot of things they would need, living halfway comfortable demanded more than just a toilet and a bed.

Building up something like a home- although temporary- for Loki and him felt awfully wrong, but there was no avoiding the fact that it was necessary.

"Is breakfast at Starbucks too great risk?" he asked the god when he returned from the bathroom after having given himself a catlick.

"'Cause I suck at cooking and doing anything food related in general."

Loki’s frown told him enough before the god even opened his mouth.

"There will be too many watchful people, you could be immediately recognized. There is too much of a risk of running into SHIELD or a Chitauri. We will get our food from somewhere else..."

Loki’s voice trailed off, yet he did not look like he was finished. Now it was Tony who frowned, sensing that there was something unspoken behind the god’s hesitation. “...I can cook."
The genius just raised his eyebrows for a second, then nodded. Somehow, he had expected something a bit more... dramatic. The way Loki was observing his every expression told the same story.

Maybe there was something in Asgardian culture the inventor did not get, but he was too tired to really care anyway.

It was pretty unnecessary to think about such trivialities in their current situation.

"Do you know a place that could provide us with food without too many... humans noticing?"

That was indeed a question he never before had spent a thought on. Doing anything outside without getting noticed and, moreover, recognized, was a physical impossibility with his whole eccentric billionaire/superhero-shit going on.

If he had wished, he could've followed his own mental breakdown in the news during the last few months. Hell, he’d had the paparazzi lounging around his front-gate and sneaking onto his property from time to time without even attempting to act unsuspicious or show him any respect.

The attention the public had showed him had increased rapidly, not that Tony had really cared.

He stared at Loki’s face without seeing it, his mind zoning out completely.

The question was not as simple as it sounded: getting hold of supplies, whether it be food, medicine, tech parts or whatever, would mean putting on a charade for public for the next several weeks. When he had been in a pharmacy or a clothing store before, he had not really thought about remaining incognito, it had just worked somehow.

"This is quite a problem, if you think about it. I'd prefer ordering from the internet, which would offer not only food, but anything I'll need for work as well, yet that's would reveal our whereabouts and create a buying-pattern that would make it considerably easy for SHIELD to track us.

So, using an actual supermarket it is."

Now Tony focused on the god's face directly again, observing his features, trying to come to a conclusion about his second thought.

No, this would not work.

"However,” he continued with a slightly frustrated sigh, "it's not like our faces are completely unknown to mankind, if you know what I mean. Sure, sunglasses and the whole hobo-look can do something about it, but sooner or later there will be somebody who will recognize one of us."

There were viral photographs of him on the internet from places where no cameras had been available and from places he did not even know people were aware of.

It did not mean anything if he did not recognize himself in the mirror any longer - people would always know.

Only now did he realized that this was probably the first time since their encounter in his house that he had deliberately said more than one sentence at a time to Loki.

Strange thought.

It strengthened the feeling of being in this mess together - he was not sure whether he liked it or not.

"We should try the supermarket, though. No real other options anyway. And we should make a list of everything we need, not just food."

God, doing everything manually, step-by-step, was so inefficient - and slow, incredibly slow.

His usual privileges being of no use, he had to spend his own time on trivialities like going
shopping. Problem was, he could not just simply make Loki do it: he didn’t know how to drive, nor where to go and what exactly to do. At least it gave his mind something to do.

When he had found his tablet again, Tony sent Jarvis a list of everything they would need, including everything that Loki added. Tony did not know the exact amount of cash they were carrying, but as soon it was consumed, they would have a problem. Tracking credit cards was child's play for SHIELD, and even though he could tap into his overseas accounts, they were probably being watched.

This would get tricky soon enough. Without Jarvis, he probably would have lost overview immediately, since Pepper had been the one managing his bank accounts for years. Shit.

With his sunglasses on and a sweater covering the glow of his reactor, the inventor went out to the car, Loki walking along beside him. At least the more Tony walked around and concentrated his efforts on doing something, the more his headache faded and the more operational he became.

He and Loki had fallen into their usual silence again, neither of them really looking forward to what had to be done. But, upon reaching the car, the two broke out into an argument, debating where they should go. The big supermarket-chains offered greater anonymity, but more people, while the smaller ones were not visited by as many people, but would attract more attention. They decided on a small one, to simply get the basic necessities.

While Tony was loading his arms with packaged convenient-food - substantial, quickly made, savable for months kinds of food with shit taste, not that he cared much at the moment- he lost Loki.

The god hadn’t seemed fond of anything the store offered, his disgusted expression making that clear, and for a minute Tony feared that he might have wandered off and done something potentially stupid.

"What do you think you're doing here?" the inventor hissed when he had finally found the god in the shop’s produce section, eying the provided fruits with suspicion. "We don’t need a gourmet kitchen! This shit will rot in a few weeks and I don’t intend to go grocery-shopping twice a week."

The god merely responded with an angry growl and turned around, first raising his eyebrows, then frowning at the sight of what Tony had chosen for food items, before finally meeting Tony’s gaze.

"Do you truly believe I will eat any of this fake food? I may be injured and malnourished, but I am not desperate, Stark. I will eat real victuals - or nothing."

With these words the god turned back to the fruits and started picking several of every available kind, stuffing them into the provided plastic bags (obviously he had already learned how to properly handle the fruit by observing the people around him).

"We also need some fish and meat, as well as some bread. And honey. We need honey."

The Trickster left Tony gaping for a moment as he simply walked away and left the inventor standing near the fruits without making any further comments.
Tony followed the other soon after, angrily trying to urge him to stop wasting their money on such trivialities as food without making too much of a scene, but Loki successfully ignored him like a mother would ignore her whining child.

Tony was on the verge of using violence when Loki started collecting honey, oil, vinegar, salt, and other herbs, but a man from the opposite shelf looked at them with a suspicious frown and Tony was forced to swallow his annoyance and resist attacking the god.

But the billionaire didn’t stop complaining, his complaints becoming more urgent when the god headed directly towards the meat counter.

“Geez, are you intending to get all Jamie Oliver with me or what? We can't afford a three-course-menu – hell, are you even listening?!”

"This is so disgusting, that one must at least be three weeks old," Loki commented, more to himself than to Tony.
Tony snorted and rolled his eyes.

"What is this?"

Loki pointed at a piece of darker meat, causing the chubby woman behind the counter to come a little closer.

"Deer."

"Well, we will take it, all of it."

“Are you nuts?!” Tony hissed in Loki's ear, still audible for the woman, who had started fetching several pieces of the animal to pack into layers of thin paper while she constantly shot angry and slightly confused looks at the two strange men on the other side of the counter.

"And what is this?"

Loki asked indifferently, pointing at a fish this time.

"It’s tuna."

"Never heard of it, but we’ll take it."

The piece of fish was also covered in paper and both packages were handed to Loki, who immediately dropped them onto the pile of food Tony held in his arms.

"Oh, you have gotta be kidding me, I’m not your fucking pack mule!” Tony complained, more than slightly pissed off, when the smelly, fresh meat was placed almost directly under his nose.

Stupid royal brat with his eating habits! Next time the god would probably demand a roasted pig with a golden apple in its mouth!

Nevertheless, the billionaire was forced to carry the whole pile of food, since he had not thought about catching a shopping cart at the entrance.
They left the suspiciously staring woman and the other people who had started queuing behind them and were now curiously following them with their gazes. The longer they stayed here, the more dangerous the situation became.
Attracting attention like that could easily lead to their discovery.
Tony was not sure whether he was becoming paranoid or if the threat was real, but he felt like all the eyes in the supermarket were on them right now. It would be best to leave while they still could.

Just before the checkout counters, Tony stopped in front of a shelf that was poorly stocked with all sorts of batteries, cable ties, and other smaller electrical equipment. Without thinking about what exactly he would need from it and what was useless and what was usable, he whistled Loki back, the god already having gotten to the checkout counters, and told him to get anything from it he could carry with two arms.

While he was directing the god, his eyes roamed, looking for anything that could be worrisome. Yet, he couldn’t spot any mall cops talking into their walkie-talkies nor any person at all who seemed to be aware of them. Just as he started to relax his nervously tensed body a bit, he caught sight of something far worse.

"Shit!" he hissed, nearly dropping the food in his arms at the sight.

That was bad and had happened faster than he had expected.

When Loki looked at his face, asking what was the matter, the inventor was already off to the shelf with the magazines, eyes focused on one particular. There was a photo of him on the front cover, an older shot from the press conference that had been held after the first Chitauri attack, and right under it, font size 80 at minimum, the eye-catching headline:

"Tony Stark MISSING".

"Son of a bitch..." he muttered, his voice raised in both disbelief and anger, and his eyes darted over the other magazines, searching for his face, then turned to Loki, who seemed equally alarmed.

"You take some money and go pay for our stuff, I'll get back to the car and wait for you there," Tony ordered, shoving what he had in his hands onto the counter before fumbling out some bills, certain that they would be enough, "Just give the cashier the money, let the stuff be packed by the guy and tip him, so he won't get peeved and remember your face."

Putting his sunglasses on again, the inventor left the building and headed straight towards the car. He cursed when he realized that he had not even thought about dismounting the license plate, the one that displayed his name to anyone who looked. And they looked, because it was a fucking nice car and it was shining white and expensive and probably the showiest thing in the parking lot.

Damn his compulsive extravagance.

"Fuck!" he cursed again, torn between either getting in the car as quick as possible or dismantling the license plate right there and then, then opted for the first choice, since the second would probably arouse even more attention than the plate itself.

Even though Loki only took three minutes, it felt like three hours, and when Tony finally saw the black-haired figure leave the exit doors, the nervous tapping of his fingers on the dashboard only increased its pace.

"Give it to me!"
Keeping his composure was a great strain on him and Tony impatiently ripped the purchased magazine out of Loki’s hands, hurriedly scanning the front page before skimming the pages until
he found the leading article.

There was another picture of him along with the article, one that was definitely newer and not exactly flattering. He could not remember shouting at the paparazzi on his yard like the picture displayed, but he obviously had, and he was afraid the bottle in his hand hadn’t been photoshopped.

The content, however, was worse.

It did not contain a lot of information, these tabs never did, but what was written was enough to get them into hot water. All it told was that he had disappeared from the hospital he had been in - due to a heart-attack it said, thanks for that, how old was he, 82? - in a state of bad health. There were lots and lots of speculations on whether he had been abducted or had killed himself or had decided to run amok as Iron Man, since a suit from mansion was missing - and his car. Fuck. How did they know that?!

Tony tossed the tabloid onto Loki’s lap, starting the engine and leaving the parking lot with screeching wheels. He could see from the corner of his eye that Loki was reading now, too, and he heard the god’s angry snarl when he came to the part with the suit and the car.

The genius’ brain was running at full speed, trying to figure out just how the public had gotten wind of their escape so quickly. It would imply an immense security leak at SHIELD, an inexcusable security leak they would NEVER allow. They would rather have the nurses killed before they could start chatting about their famous patients.

Another fact was that there was no mention whatsoever of Loki, not a tiny bit - and a mass-murdering Norse god on the run sure was worth at least a marginal note. There was something cooking, he could feel it, all his senses tingled on alert.

"It's intentional. SHIELD fed them the necessary, but harmless information to get a hold of us. They're so desperate they're relying on the public eye now, even though making pacts with the press is highly dangerous for them. We're fucked."

"Don't get hysterical, Stark."

The god growled in his direction, his annoyance prevailing over any concerns he might have had. Tony felt like the other underestimated the press's power. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel nervously.

"It could be a problem, you are right about that. I also have to admit that I did not expect them to react so quickly. However, we do not need to worry as long as we make it back to the house without being noticed by too many eyes… though..."

He paused, causing Tony to look at him in anticipation.

Apparently the paranoia was contagious, since the trickster had turned around in his seat to take a look out of the window at all the sides and the back of the car, checking if anyone was following them.

“...this could get a little difficult,” he concluded, his voice a strained calm.

The genius merely let out an amused snort before smoothing his face into a dead-pan expression.

"We just need to get back into the house; next time we go outside I will disguise us, as well as the car. They will not find us, Stark, not unless they have built a machine which can look through illusions
and shapeshifting - which I think is fairly impossible."

They both were relieved when they finally arrived at the house without any major incidents and the car disappeared behind the metallic door, hiding them from brought daylight and wandering eyes.

However, it had not been their last trip. They had food, but everything else was missing: no material to work with at all, not even a fucking stove to prepare the food Loki had bought (although that was the least of their priorities right now).

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for every kind of feedback, it's much appreciated :D

Next chapter will be a long one!

Thanks to out beta Yue1234!
Assault

Chapter Summary

There is an unexpected visitor, leading to a chain of events neither Tony nor Loki could have anticipated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After having successfully returned to the house, the next task - walking up all the stairs to get out of the garage with one hand occupied by a rather heavy shopping bag - proved to be as equally difficult.

But in the end, Loki managed to get to the room that was meant to be a kitchen without tripping and injuring himself further. He dropped his bag beside the one Stark had carried, sighing in relief as the weight vanished from his arms.

The trip had exhausted the still weakened god, and he was thankful for the few minutes of rest that were offered to him. He sat down where he stood, his head and back resting against the wall.

Only now did the god notice that he had been barefoot for the whole trip. He supposed he was lucky that no one had noticed, or if someone had they had either not cared or had thought him to just be another one of those countless beggars on the street.
He sure looked like it.

Once comfortably settled against the wall, shoulders slumped and relaxed, Loki allowed himself to close his eyes for just a moment, giving in to the fatigue that had already begun to settle over him, turning his limbs to lead and fogging his mind with the promise of thoughtless slumber.

He was still weak; it would take weeks for him to return to his full strength, but there wasn’t enough time.

Soon they would need his magic to leave the house. Disguising them was the most important thing for Loki to focus on, but first he would just sleep; sleep and forget everything.

The god was close to falling into a deep and numb slumber when a ringing noise made him jolt upwards, his muscles tensing and his veins expanding while his heart rate rapidly increased, anticipating a fight.

What was that noise? Had Stark done something? Or were there intruders, attackers?

Loki could not see the inventor and had no idea where the man had gone, but he didn’t dare call for him, not as long as he did not know what was going on.

By the Norns, he did not even have a small knife or anything else to defend himself with!

The ringing noise sounded again, echoing around the house and Loki froze in place, trying to listen, trying to make out any noise that would convey what was happening.
Yet he heard nothing but the rasping sound of his own breaths and the pounding of his heart.
The god did not even notice Stark’s quiet approach until the billionaire stood suddenly behind him, making him turn his head and flinch at the sound of his voice, which seemed much too loud.

"You shut the fuck up while I see who's at the door. It's probably a salesman, I don't know. Nobody with the intention of hunting us down would ring the doorbell."

Stark's voice was low, intensifying the tense and suspenseful atmosphere he had probably intended to dissolve. 

Loki did not answer and kept his eyes fixed on the man in front of him. Stark was taking the whole thing too lightheartedly, not aware of the danger they could be in.

But Loki would fight with his bare hands, clawing and biting his way through the enemies if necessary.

Stark passed the god as casually as he could and, despite the overall bad feeling he had, Loki followed, in case something happened.

Together they were stronger than on their own.

"Oh fuck me running!"

The human stumbled back a few feet from the spyhole he had been looking through and cursed, probably louder than he should have, distressed by whoever he had seen on the other side of the door.

"Who is it?" The god asked from behind, keeping some distance between himself and the door.

"Tony, open the door. Don't be ridiculous."

Loki turned to face the door.

He knew that voice.

"It's Rogers," Stark's gaze darted from the door to Loki and back again, "He knows we're here, hiding would be futile. I'm gonna let him in."

"Tony, come on, I saw your car go into the garage," Rogers’ voice was growing more annoyed. He would probably just destroy the door if it was not opened, but Loki didn’t think that was a good reason to just do as the supersolider said.

Too late, Loki noticed that Stark’s hand was already on the doorknob.

"I warn you, don’t you dare open that door!" his shouting was completely ignored and the entrance opened, words Loki could not understand exchanged with the person behind.

That was too much, what did the fool think he was doing?!

Loki spurted forward, tried to smash the door closed, but the moment he touched it there was a force from the other side, so enormous it sent him almost crashing into the next wall.

"I am sorry that it had to go that way," Rogers spoke, but Loki did not listen; his survival instincts took hold of him, wiping his mind clean of any reasonable thoughts.

The only thing he knew was that Rogers was a fake, nothing but a disguise and would likely kill them in an instant if it came too close.

They had to get away before it was too late!

Somehow Loki got a hold of Stark's collar and pulled him back toward the door at the other end of the hallway; all his pain and exhaustion was forgotten for the moment, his mind and body had awakened with an intensity he had not felt in months.
Damn it, he needed something pointy, something sharp to defend himself with, to kill the attacker with, but there was nothing in reach, the walls were empty, the floor plain. His bare hands then. Rogers, or what pretended to be him, walked inside, tall and muscular with blond hair, blue eyes, a white shirt, and grey pants.

"Damn Loki, let go of him! I'm not here to bring you back. Just release him, 'kay?"
He was lying, Loki knew it.

"Don't come any closer!" the god shouted, ignoring every spoken word of the slowly approaching creature in front of him, unable to hide the panic in his voice. He backed further away, one hand still clawed into the back of Stark's shirt and tugging him along, every muscle tensed in anticipation to run or attack.

"Holy...you are strangling him!" the intruder took a few fast steps in their direction and Loki instantly let go of Stark, fleeing around the next corner and down the hallway.

Yet he’d barely made it into the living room when strong hands caught him from behind, effectively stopping him. However, Loki did not give his opponent the chance to get a hold on him and spun around, his hands instantly going to the other's throat before his wrists were caught in the grasp of the blond man.

The Midgardian was clearly at an advantage, not weakened through malnutrition and wounds, but that did not keep Loki from struggling, wiggling in the other's grip and clawing at ever inch of skin he could reach while trying to bite at the fingers that were curled around his hands.

But then, with a loud bang, the supersoldier slammed Loki against the wall and the god let out a strangled cry; his wounded body was maybe willing to fight, but it was still vulnerable. The bit of breath the god could regain was used to yell incomprehensible insults at Rogers, or what ever it might be that was keeping him in its grasp.

"Goddamnit Loki!! He's not a Chitauri, for Christ's sake, you're blowing it, Loki, you're ruining it!"
Stark's voice was sharp, nearly cracking, and he was on the two of them in an instant, inefficiently tugging at Roger's broad shoulder.

"No, I am not ruining it, I am trying to save our lives...ah!"
A strangled and shocked gasp escaped Loki's lips as the man increased the pressure on his wrists and pressed them onto the wall, fixing the god in his current position.

Loki still tried to kick at him, to get rid of him (or it) somehow, but his strength was nothing in comparison to the supersolider’s and his previous exhaustion soon reclaimed his attention, his body going limp and weak in the grip of the creature.

Even his eyes stopped moving and focused on the face before him, his pupils blown wide from adrenaline and his breath coming out in long, heavy pants.

The two men kept staring at each other, wordless, before the god gave in to the human and averted his gaze, looking down at the floor instead in an almost ashamed manner, aware of his mistake.

No Chitauri, that much was clear after taking a direct look into the Captain's eyes, which were so utterly human that they could not be faked, at least not by a soulless creature like the Chitauri. Suddenly the whole situation seemed less dangerous, and more embarrassing, considering the way Loki had just overreacted.

"You won't try to attack me if I let go of you, is that clear?" the supersoldier asked in a firm and
commanding voice, not easing his intense stare into the god's eyes, even if he had already submitted to him. The grip around Loki's wrists was still firm, holding them in place without any further effort, while the god's arms jerked in regular intervals, still trying to get rid of his captor.

"Yes."
The hold around Loki's arms vanished and the moment he was no longer supported by Roger's hold, the Trickster's knees gave out and he slid down the wall. Loki was almost grateful when the supersoldier finally averted his gaze from his exhausted and defeated body, turning towards Stark instead, who was standing a couple of meters away from them.

Loki raised his head, looking at Stark, trying to read what the human was thinking, but a firm glare full of anger and annoyance in his direction made Loki look away.

The god quickly looked back down at his knees, not entirely able to deal with the dishonor he had brought upon himself through his rash action. Usually it had been Thor who had reacted that way, without thinking, brash, and with a hidden, but not to be underestimated, hysteria.

Well, he really had a reason to be ashamed.

"What do you think you are doing here, Tony?" Loki heard the supersoldier now shout at Stark, Rogers' strong arm movements visible from the corner of the god's eye.

"You set hell loose in the hospital with your disappearance, you know that?! We thought you had been kidnapped or something, that the Chitauri had come back to end what they had begun! You are just..." the supersoldier let out an angry growl, unable to find the right word to describe the billionaires ignorance, "...what the hell are you actually doing here...with him?"

"Private project. Sorry for not including you, pal, but there's no place for our star-spangled do-gooder."

"You're conspiring with the man who brought the Chitauri to Earth? You're insane, Tony, insane or stupid - or suicidal, I can't tell which."

"I doubted from the beginning that you would be able to grasp the dimensions of what's necessary," Stark responded coolly, letting the insult drip off like he didn't care. It was obvious that the supersoldier had no idea what exactly they were doing here; maybe he had a faint image based on what he had heard from Loki and Tony back in the hospital, but surely he was unable to imagine the whole plan.

"What on earth are you talking about? What have you been doing?!

"It's funny you think I owe you an explanation, I thought the fact that I left your circle of idle braindeads in a cloak-and-dagger-operation was an understandable way of saying 'Kiss my ass!',' The engineer's tone was biting now, aiming to hurt, to make a sharp cut to get rid of his own pain. It seemed to be working, although not how he had apparently wanted it to, for he was grabbed by his shoulders and shaken almost violently.

"Who do you think you are?! We thought you were dead! Or worse! This is no damn game! We're all stuck in this together, you can't simply wander off with the enemy for- for- I don't know what for!"

Stark somehow managed to get a hold of the strong, tensed muscles of the blond's arms and push himself away from the man, shouting a "Get your fucking hands off me!" while he stumbled back a few steps.

Loki found himself growing slightly anxious as he watched the two men arguing, shouting, and
getting close to attacking each other. The whole situation had escalated so fast from slight tension to aggressive threatening that it was practically predestined that things would turn physical sooner or later and Loki was sure that he should do something to prevent such an outcome. Despite knowing this, the god stayed frozen in his position, at a loss of what to do.

"I should drag you back to SHIELD, both of you! You are behaving like a damn child, Tony, like some damn egoistic asshole!"

There was tension in the supersoldier's muscles and an urge to punch his fist into Stark's face, an urge only held back by the sheer amount of self-control the man possessed. Something had to be done before the engineer was seriously harmed; if Stark was injured and defeated by the supersoldier, Loki knew that he would be next. He also knew that being caught again and dragged back to SHIELD, where he would likely be locked up in a hole until the end of his days or tortured until he summoned the Tesseract, was not an option.

"Your actions aren't only putting yourself in danger, but all of us as well! If you want to get yourself killed, fine, but I won't stand around watching you ruin everything we desperately tried to build up while YOU locked yourself up in your house and mashed your brain into pieces with expensive alcohol!" the captain was screaming now, a loud and intense sound that gave a good impression of how strong this human actually was. They were clearly at a disadvantage here. As Stark would put it, there were undoubtedly, unavoidably, and hopelessly ‘fucked’.

"You know what? I'm done with your shit, really, I don't have the time and energy to run after you and try to keep you from blowing yourself up!"

Having expected more words from the blond man, Loki was caught off guard when the mortal turned around, closed the distance between himself and the god with a few quick steps, and grabbed him by the side of his collar. Loki gurgled out a startled scream at that, which reminded him an awful lot of a wounded animal, and was jerked to his knees by the human, struggling against the grip but without any success.

"Rogers! Let go of him!" Stark snarled and, although he was easily outmatched by the supersoldier’s physical power and had no authority over the blond, his voice showed no sign of surrender.

But Rogers did not even flinch at that, he just tugged at Loki's collar again, making him nearly loose his balance when the Midgardian straightened up, his stance steady and determined with his broad chest heaving and sinking with his hard breathing.

"If you’ve decided to behave like a lunatic, I'll have to take you both as prisoners. This was NOT my intention when I came here, Tony, be assured of that."

Without letting go of Loki or taking his eyes off Stark, Rogers rummaged around for something in his pants-pocket and took out his mobile a second later.

Loki noticed the billionaire's eyes widening when the implications of the phone call Rogers was about to make flashed in front of his eyes.

Before the supersoldier could press any button, Stark whirled around, almost diving headlong towards the stairs, earning him startled gazes.

"Where are you going?!!" Loki shouted, angry and on the edge of despair; this could not be
happening!

The god had a bad feeling that Stark had decided to take the opportunity and flee on his own, but some stupid, childish part of him thought that the mortal might have a plan, one that would involve both of them escaping.

And indeed, with an enormous crash, the concrete of the floor exploded and collapsed, leaving a pile of debris and dust on the cellar floor and a hole big enough to fit a full-grown horse through. Lights lit up from the direction of the hole and the familiar humm of the Iron Man suit's repulsors filled the air before Stark rushed through the gaping hole, flying through the thick dust and stopping only a few feet away from Rogers, who had lost his grip on Loki in his surprise. Loki took the opportunity to immediately slip out of the supersoldier's reach, scurrying past the gaping hole in the floor and the metallic armor, seeking out the safest place: anywhere behind Stark.

Superior physique or not, he really did not plan on getting between those two if this was going to be messy, an option that was becoming more likely with every passing second. Being hit by one of the two could result in a fatal injury in his current condition.

Stark raised his hand, repulsor glimmering dangerously, and aimed it at Rogers, his expression hidden by the faceplate. Rogers was staring at him like he had gone completely mad now, but it did not matter any more. A gridlocked situation like this could only be solved by escalation - no way either of them would surrender at this point.

"Fuck off, Steve."

"You want it to end like this?" the captain's firm voice echoed through the wide room.

From everything Loki could see of the blond’s face through the dust in the air - a confident and angered expression - he could tell that the human had not intended this encounter to turn out like that, but he had been prepared for it.

The god backed further away as dust whirled in his direction, the particles thrown up by the Iron Man's sudden and rocket like start as Stark flew at the supersoldier. But Rogers dodged the attack easily and the other man almost crashed, faceplate forward, into the next wall, catching himself only at the last moment with his hands against the wall and turned.

But the blond man was already prepared for a second attack and he dodged it again, his movement fast and controlled before he hit the back of Stark's head with his bare fist.

A metallic sound resonated around the room and the impact of the strike sent Stark crashing onto the ground. Rogers was on him in seconds, pounding his fist again and again into the metal of the suit, creating dent after dent.

Stark was losing, that much had become obvious after only a few glimpses of the fight. He had no chance; he was still injured and the constant use of painkillers and alcohol, along with the weakness caused by months of exhaustion and inadequate care for his body, had slowed his mind down. Not even the suit could compensate for that.

At some point, Rogers had stopped hitting Stark and grasped the nape of his limp suit instead, turning it around to tear off the faceplate, revealing Stark's beaten face. The human looked defeated; his eyes were barely opened, blood was dripping from his forehead, nose, and mouth, and his breathing was becoming swallow.
"I will give you one last opportunity, Tony. Either you tell me what you are doing here and why you ran off without telling anyone, or I will make sure that you will not only be returned to SHIELD, but get locked up until you come back to your mind."

Some part of his brain urged Loki to take this opportunity and run while the supersoldier was occupied, but something stopped him. It was the knowledge that Stark had returned to help him, maybe not out of benevolence, but maybe out of something that could distantly be considered comradeship.

So instead of turning around and fleeing, Loki, without thinking, ran and threw himself against the supersoldier.

Most of the strength the attack contained only came from his own weight and not the movement of muscles, but it served it purpose and Rogers let go of Stark.

They both crashed into the ground and Loki was immediately thrown off, screaming as he was hurled against the next wall. Pain jolted through his back, but he had at least achieved his goal.

Stark was on his feet again, swaying and close to fainting, but with both glowing hands aimed at Rogers.

The soldier had no time to regain a fighting stance, the moment he turned around to face the Iron Man the repulsor blast was released, hitting him in the chest and hurling him against the already crumbling wall. Rogers thumped onto the ground, bits of plaster raining down around him and he lay there, limp and unmoving.

“Oh fucking hell...”
Stark’s voice was merely a hoarse whisper, and he looked as if he might join Rogers on the floor at any moment.

"We have to get out of here, I'm sure someone heard us,” Loki said, scrambling back to his feet and trying to ignore the ache in his body.
Stark was unresponsive, his tired gaze still lingering on the defeated captain.
"Move, Stark. He is not dead, and even if he is, it cannot be changed. Do you want to be caught?"
Whether it was the god’s words that triggered the mortal or the distant howl of sirens (that were quickly growing louder), Tony’s mind snapped back into action and his gaze became more focused and attentive.
A low groan sounded from the lump that was Rogers and the soldier twitched, slowly regaining consciousness.

Loki was already halfway down the hallway towards the garage, eager to escape the supersoldier once he woke, when he realized Stark was not following. The god turned back to see what was taking Stark so long and saw the other man raising his glowing hand slowly, aiming it at Rogers and moving at an agonizingly slow rate, as if in trance.
And then he fired.
Smoke filled the room and the movement on the floor censed, but Stark still stood unmoved, hands still raised in the same position.

Then he fired a second, a third, a fourth time, stumbling backwards with each blast, nearly thrown off balance from the blowback, until the floor beneath Rogers crumbled entirely and gave out, the supersolider’s unmoving body falling down into the cellar along with a pile of debris.

Loki watched the whole scene in silence, a strange fascination keeping him from demanding Stark to stop. But the loud sound of the collapsing floor brought him back to his senses and made him remember what had just happened and what they had to do now.
"Come on, Stark!"

The mortal uttered a strained grunt, but turned around, finally leaving the totally demolished living room behind.

"...stuff from the cellar 'n the car. Key's in coat-pocket. You drive. Airport."

"There is not enough time and the cellar is in ruins. Get in the car!" Loki hissed back, louder than Stark, and turned to move down the hallway as fast as his strained legs could carry him. He tore Stark's jacket down from the coat hook, ignoring the ripping noise, and fiddled with its pockets, grasping the key.

Everything was moving much too slow right now; Stark was still stumbling around somewhere behind him and a loud metallic noise announced that the man had fallen to the ground. The sirens from outside were closer now, much closer, and the panic that had mysteriously subsided in the last few seconds was returning, even more intense than before.

"Get off the ground! Damn you!" Loki turned around and headed back to the man lying on the floor. He took one of Stark's arms and the human was able to heave himself back up onto his feet, half supported by Loki, half leaning against the wall.

With the mortal and the heavy suit leaning on him, Loki guided Stark down into the garage, the human's swaying almost sending them both toppling down the stairs. "It was necessary," the mortal mumbled while getting carried along by Loki, talking more to himself than to the god. Loki did not really care if Stark felt remorse for what he had done to Rogers, what was going on in the mortal's head was of no importance right now.

"Get in the car," Loki commanded, letting go of Stark the moment they were in the garage and heading for the car. After some fiddling with the key, he successfully managed to open the door of the driver's seat and slip inside, closely followed by Stark.

More than ungraceful, the inventor slumped down in the other seat beside Loki's own, still in his suit and with his eyes closed as if he might fall asleep at any moment. If he had not already fainted.

"Don't you dare to fall asleep now! What do I have to do?" Loki snarled at the mortal, his patience vanishing with every minute. Stark's lack of response and cooperation was more than annoying him, and in another situation, he would have loved to punch the mortal in the face, to get at least some damn reaction.

"Yes, yes, I'm here, I'm awake. Uh, key in the hole, left foot on the pedal on the far left. Now, turn the key."

Loki did as he was told and the engine came alive with a loud hum.

"Awesome. Now the clutch, rest your foot on it, lever on your right on 'R', then press the pedal on the far left carefully- carefully!- while you simultaneously release the pressure on the clutch. You drive backwards out of the garage, and then you go on '1' before accelerate as quickly as you can. It's fairly simple, just hurry up."

"There is no way I can drive this beast. I thought it would do that on it's own!" the god complained, fiddling nervously with the steering wheel while his foot was pressed on the pedal on the left. Loki slowly let go of it while he put pressure on the right one, as Stark had told him.

For a second he thought it would actually work, that he had tamed the steel creature, but all he got
in return was a load roar of the engine before the car buckled and the engine died.

"What happened?!!"

"Dammit, just do it again, we don't have time for this...shit, shit, shit..."

Stark's now obvious nervousness was rubbing off on Loki, but he repeated the process, almost tearing out the key with his shaking hands.

He wasn't usually the one that was nervous, but currently his heart was fluttering like a caged bird against his ribcage and sweat was trickling down his forehead. If SHIELD caught them, there would be no mercy for them, no chance to escape. He had to get this machine to obey; his life and more depended on it.

This time the engine did not die on instant, but made an even more infernal howling noise and the car was catapulted backwards on screeching wheels, out of the garage and right into one of the emerging police cars.

There was a loud crash of metal on metal, screams from outside, and a startled gasp from Stark beside him, but Loki ignored all of it and just followed the human's guide, trying to block out everything else that was happening around him.

Move the R to the 1, while pressing the left pedal. Done.

Letting go of said pedal and press the right one. Done.

The engine again let out a loud roar and the car jolted forward, right through several bushes and fences, which were crushed by the metal beast's strength before the god managed to turn the steeling wheel and guided the machine back onto the street.

Their speed was increasing with every second -Loki kept his foot pressed on the right pedal- as well as the infernal noise from the engine, which definitely had not been that loud before.

The god also had the feeling that the car had stopped gaining speed and the police cars behind were closing in, getting dangerously close to them. Gunshots rang through the air, but they all missed the car, or at least, did not hit anything of importance.

"This thing is not going faster!" Loki screamed at the man in the iron suit, keeping his eyes desperately fixed on the road.

Stark did not answer at first, a quick look to the side revealed why; the human was vomiting into the footrest (of course he had to do that now!) and eventually moaned, "Change the gear, goddammit, don't forget the left pedal or it won't work."

Loki did not entirely understand at first, then he remembered the device on his right and repeated his previous action, though they almost crashed into the parked cars at the side of the street while he kept looking at the gearshift.

They were lucky that the streets were too narrow for the police cars to drive beside and encircle them, giving Loki enough time to figure out the higher gears.

Within minutes they were driving at speeds higher than any of their chasers could achieve, rushing through the streets like a bullet, causing vehicles coming out of crossroads to stop abruptly and honk angrily at them. The cars that had been chasing them had disappeared and only the distant sound of their sirens made their presence known.
Adrenaline was pumping though Loki's veins and he was panting slightly; everything was a little too much for him right now: his exhaustion, his extreme concentration, even his excitement about their spectacular escape. Driving such a machine felt strange, different than anything he had done before, but it was exhilarating, would have been enjoyable is not for their current situation. He could almost understand why Stark was obsessed with these things.

"Stark?" there was no answer from the passenger seat, but the god did not dare to avert his gaze a second time from the street, not with their current speed. He heard a low moan and another gagging noise.

Vomiting again, as it seemed.

"Stark, where should I go?!"

There were more noises from the side, before he heard Stark pressing out one word: "Highway."

It was embarrassing to admit, but Loki had no idea what a 'Highway' was exactly and had no time to think about it. This was what Thor must have felt like all those times Loki had told him about magic, geography, or history. He simply lacked the knowledge to understand it.

But that was a realization Loki would have to consider later.

"What is a highway?!"

"Fuckin´ big ....street, several lanes. Look out for the airport...sign," the words were slurred and interrupted by pained gasps and moans. It really sounded like the human was dying.

Nevertheless Loki could not simply stop the car, not with their enemies still chasing after them. They had to put at least a few miles between them and their persecutors before he could even think about looking after Stark.

The human had told him to look for a huge street and so the god did, seeing one fitting the description after driving several blocks.

Loki was pretty sure by now that their enemies had lost their trail, but he needed to be sure, they could not make the same mistake a second time. The human would have to wait a few minutes more.

The Trickster took the next street leading to the highway and, once on the broad street, he finally push the car to its full speed, passing every other machine on the broad street with ease once they were far out of the city.

Loki did not dare to look back.

It started with a slight vibration in the air, so light that it was hard to believe any other being than a god could sense anything like it. But the vibration increased, surging to a deep roaring noise, unmistakably caused by a machine, getting louder with every second until the whole car was shaking from it.

"STOP THE CAR, OR WE WILL OPEN THE FIRE!" a voice echoed from outside, loud, demanding, and with a metallic sound.

Loki almost jolted out of his seat when he finally dared to throw a glance at the rear-view mirror and saw a black helicopter hovering only a few meters behind them in the air, the S.H.I.E.L.D emblem printed on it and a gun on its downside, pointed directly at the car.
"STARK! Do something! Shoot it down!"

Damn, he totally depended on the mortal's reaction now and it was not a situation he liked. But Loki could neither stop the car, it would mean their end, nor could he drive on. They would be torn to pieces by the deadly machine behind them.

And his magic... it was still too weak, too little, and his slowly healing body was absorbing what little he had regained. No, Stark had to kill it.

"Is this fucking James Bond or what?" Stark snapped, but he reacted. He grabbed the headrest and, his hand still in its metallic gauntlet, heaved himself upwards.

Glaring light from the floodlights fell onto the car, blinding Stark, who muttered incoherent curses and aimed, now blindly, the palm of his hand at the dark form that was the helicopter.

A beam shattered the glass of the rear window into millions of pieces – Loki saw everything through his mirror - then disappeared unhelpfully into the air, not even close to the helicopter.

"CEASE FIRE AND STOP THE CAR!"

Stark didn’t lower his arm and Loki did not stop the car, there was no chance that they would give up now. The mortal adjusted his arm, inhaling deeply before exhaling slowly, his breath ragged and shaky, then he fired a second time.

This time, he hit.

With a metallic, screeching bang two of the machine’s rotor blades said their good-byes and disappeared behind the helicopter, crashing down somewhere on the street’s surface. For a split-second, the huge machine seemed to hover weightlessly in the air and Loki could only stare at it, unable to close his eyes or move an inch until, almost in slow-motion, the helicopter’s nose started to tilt downwards – and then everything was drowned in light, infernal noise, and chaos.

Abrupt gunfire shredded the air around the god and mortal, the helicopter’s occupants managing to get in one last attempt at stopping them. The obnoxious sound of bullets penetrating the car’s metal was drowned out by the sound of the crashing helicopter. It screeched over the asphalt for a few feet, emitting sparks and a deafening noise that would ring in Loki’s ear before a few days, then, without warning, the entire machine exploded.

Dragging his eyes away from the orange flames reflected in the rear-mirror and back to the street in front of the car, Loki gripped the steering wheel tightly, carrying him and Stark away from the conflagration at top-speed so that the blast wave did them no harm and only sent an enormous heat burning its way through the splattered rear window.

Somewhere behind them the crashed wreck on the highway was still burning, would probably burn itself out completely if no one extinguished it, and through the thick, black smoke which flooded the whole width of the highway one could see and hear incoming vehicles crashing and trying to brake with screeching wheels.

Shocked faces behind windows flashed past them, a huge traffic jam on the other side of the highway was already forming. Their lane, however, was completely free behind them now, no one following them, since the whole street was successfully blocked.
The sight of the pure chaos they had just caused made Loki smirk and for a few, pleasant seconds, he just kept driving forward, then he remembered where they had originally been going.

"Stark. Stark!"

“What?!"

"Which way?"

The billionaire described the way to their desired destination, a private airfield, as simply as he could, and Loki followed his instructions without commenting.

The last few miles were traveled at a blurring speed, barely readable road signs telling them they were getting closer and closer, and cars honking angrily around them. With his side mirrors long gone, Loki drove without caring what was going on around them, but somehow they managed and they were soon breaking through the closed barrier which marked the airfield's entrance without slowing down, staff yelling at them, until Loki brought the car with a drift to a stop, right in front of the plane which had Tony's family name painted in huge letters all over it.

The sudden silence shrilled in both of their ears.

Stark still hung in a half-sitting position, the only thing holding him straight being his arm hung over the backrest, in the same position he had been firing from, while Loki was unmoved in his seat, both hands still on the steering wheel.

“I'm good, I'm fine...god, I'm gonna throw up in a second...” the human muttered as an answer to an unasked question while Loki was scrambling out of the car.

In a really ungraceful manner the human got out of the car, actually letting himself be dragged by the trickster more then actually moving. It was hard to tell if the human was really that injured or just lethargic, but right now, the god did not care about the 'if' and 'but'. The way Stark clung to Loki's shoulder for dear life was a clear implication that he was truly in severe pain.

Soon, they were no longer alone.

Two airport-workers in bright orange overalls were approaching them, one already saying something about breaking security guidelines Loki did not care about, seemingly unimpressed by their famous visitor, his not less famous accompanist, and their overall messy condition. Their dramatic entrance had, of course, aroused a lot of attention in the practically empty airport. They may as well have roasted themselves up and put themselves on a sliver platter for SHEILD.

“Shut up, emergency-” Stark started, trying to emit at least a bit of authority, then stopped dead as his eyes became unfocused and only Loki's shaking him brought him back and he exhaled deeply before he tried again, nearly all of his weight held by the god by now.

“Ready for take-off?”

“Yes, sir, but you really can't-”

“Awesome. Get me the stairs and a pilot and-”

Loki saw the human swaying in the edge of his vision, though he noticed almost to late that the man was falling and barely managed to catch the limp heap of metal and flesh.

A pained groan escaped him as the combined weight of suit and body forced the god onto one knee.

The wound on his abdomen burned as his muscles tensed to hold the position, his breathing coming out ragged and quick.
"Stark, get up, we have not the time for this!"

There came no response from the human and the reason soon became obvious when the god saw the blood dripping from the man's hairline down onto the ground in a steady flow.

"Damn..." Loki muttered to himself, becoming aware that the mortal would not be waking up in the next couple of minutes, if not hours. Everything depended on him now and, given the situation, that was something he truly didn’t wish for. Loki glared up at the two workers, one of whom had stepped closer when Stark had fainted.

"You heard him, get us a pilot!"

The two workers stood unmoved at Loki’s demand but averted their eyes from the coldness in Loki’s glare.

"We are not authorized to do so, and Mr. Stark is in no condition for a flight."

One of the men said, but Loki’s head snapped to the other of the two, who had gotten out a small device, one Loki remembered was a tool for communication. The god was pretty sure the mortal intended to call anyone but a pilot.

Barely thinking, Loki let Stark drop almost carelessly to the ground and jolted forward, tearing the device out of the man’s hand and tossing it away.

"Holy shi-"

A fist met the god's face seconds later and a punch which would have barely done him any harm had he been at his full strength, caused the god now to tumble backwards and drop to the ground beside Stark, lacking the ability to hold his balance in his slightly dizzy and weakened state.

Loki held his spinning head for moment, blinking several times to get rid of the blur in his vision before fighting to get upright again.

"Get us a pilot or I swear, I will rip out your intestines!"

"Shit, call the police, man! I'll hold him back!" shouted one of the workers while the other scrambled for the communication device Loki had knocked to the ground. Though the command had been in vain, there were already sirens blaring in the distance, and, judging from the noise and frequency of said sirens, it wasn’t just two or three police cars, but a whole bunch of them.

Loki bared his teeth in anger, realizing that they had no chance of using the plane. They didn’t even have the stairs to get in it. And teleporting...out of the question.

With the last remnants of his strength the god grabbed the unconscious, full armored Stark and shoved him back into the leather-seat of the car, throwing suspicious glances at the two workers standing only six meters away.

Despite his attention, Loki barely saw it coming when the two suddenly advanced on him and tried to get hold of his arms to press him against the car.

The following counter attacks were nothing but pitifully for a prince of Asgard, even his much younger self would have laughed at his ridiculous attempts to keep the men at a distance through punching them in their faces or bellies; but what else could he do with no magic, no weapon, and barely any strength?

Loki eventually landed a lucky hit that managed to push the men far enough away for him to escape to the car. He half ran, half stumbled around the car and threw himself into the driver’s seat.
Starting the car with trembling hands, he even managed to start driving without killing the motor as he had the first time, but there was not time to cherish that little success. The god hastily spurred the machine, intending to leave the small airport over the road they had come, only to see the first police cars emerging through said road.

Well, damn.

The god turned the car with screeching wheels, almost crashing into the two workers who had tried to block the car’s way but who jolted away as the machine gained speed. The car shot forward through the chain-link fence around the airport and rumbled over a path of dry grass before it got back onto the highway.

Some of the police cars, which had not taken the road down to the airport, took up the chase, all blinking lights and blaring sirens. The god pressed the pedal down as far as possible, passing machines left and right as the machine increased its speed, leaving every other car on the highway far behind.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took me way too long to edit...

We want to increase the uploads from one to two updates each week, semester break is close and my internship will end this week, which mean, a lot of time to write!

Thanks to out beta Yue1234!
Thrown off their original plan, Tony and Loki have to improvise.

Loki did not know how long they had been driving like this, but when he glanced back he could not see any police cars nor hear any sirens.

It seemed they had escaped for a second time, though it had been a close one and Loki did not intend to challenge their already sparse luck. After ensuring once again that there were no more of their chasers in sight, the god took the next highway exit, following random streets to an unknown destination. They were luckily in a less populated area now and he rarely saw any other cars, which he was grateful for. Loki may have learned the basics of operating the machine, but he had no idea how to move the thing properly in traffic and the last thing they needed right now was a stupid and avoidable accident.

Minutes, maybe hours, went by as they passed several small towns and finally entered an area that was mostly deserted and almost devoid of planet life. The inside of the car was incredibly hot by now, and the sun was mercilessly shining down, heating the interior to a point where even the air coming in from the rear-window didn’t bring any relief.

Stark had not moved since Loki had put him into the passenger’s seat and, to be honest, the Asgardian was not even sure if the mortal was alive anymore. But even if Stark had died from his wounds or from overheating or from dehydration or from whatever else Midgardians tended to die from, the god could not bring himself to care very much at that moment. There were black spots in his vision and he felt very close to fainting; he was keeping himself awake only by sheer willpower.

He pulled the car off the road to follow a stony path between some mountains before he stopped the half demolished machine under a couple of shade providing trees.

When Loki opened the door he was greeted by a pleasant rush of fresh air that, while still warm, was not suffocatingly hot like inside the car. The god climbed out of the machine, dropped onto the dusty ground, and leaned his back against the metal surface.

"Oohw..." Loki let out a pained groan and buried his face in his hands, trying to get rid of the dizziness and nausea that seemed to be increasing with every second now that the stress and excitement of the chase had ceased.

The pain was also coming back; not only in the wound over his abdomen, but simply everywhere: his skull, legs, rips. Loki felt sore all over and tired; tired enough to just want to lie down on the ground beside the car and fall asleep.
Damn Stark in the passenger’s seat, damn his own dirty clothes and the wrecked backside of the car, and damn his stupid and immature plan.
He should have known better; he should have known that this whole thing was not going to work, just like everything else he had ever attempted in his life.

Now he was here, without food or water, in the middle of some desert, with a machine he was barely able to use and a likely dead mortal inside it.
Loki could barely think of anything else that could go wrong.

But, no matter how hard he tried and how exhausted he was, sleep simply refused to come (Loki blamed the heat) and after ten minutes he got up to finally take a closer look at Stark.
The god had to admit that he was a little concerned now; it had been two hours since Stark had passed out and the man had not moved since.

Loki moved around the car to open all its doors, letting some fresh air in, and frowned in disgust at the sight of Stark’s vomit in the footwell.
Great, Loki was definitely not going to clean that up.
If Stark was dead then the god would simply leave him in the car, would take what he could get off the suit and the car, and get away as fast as possible. Considering that Stark had just saved his life, Loki’s plan of abandoning the inventor’s body was churlish and made the Trickster seem ungrateful, but the god’s current mood was bad enough that he was ready to ignore any and all guilt the action of leaving Stark would cause.

Grabbing Stark’s limp body by the pits of its arms, Loki tugged the human out of the car and dropped him onto the dusty ground, not caring if the human’s head hit the ground a little hard.
Stark's eyes were closed, but as he took a closer look, Loki realized the human was breathing.
Sleeping.
Loki had been driving for hours to ensure their escape and the mortal had simply been having a nice little nap in the backseat.
Well, this was just getting better and better.

"Wake up, Stark."
No reaction.
"Wake up."
Still no reaction.
"Damn it."

Loki slapped the mortal’s face a few times, not hard enough to cause any damage, but also not very gently.
And finally, after the fourth hit, Stark awoke, startled out of his death-like sleep.
Loki backed away when the mortal inhaled sharply, his breathing violently cut off by a coughing fit which made his jaded body tremble from exhaustion.

"Water!" Stark coughed impatiently, waving his hand in the direction of the car. Loki rose to his feet, eager to get away from the coughing mortal, to fetch the demanded.

While Loki rummaged through the car, tossing aside cheap wires and tools, he noticed, out of the
corner of his eye, Stark getting into a position halfway between sitting and lying.

"Here," Loki said, smooth and indifferent when he handed the mortal a plastic bottle of piss-warm water. The inventor grabbed it and emptied it greedily, not caring that half of its content spilled down his chin.

Only when Stark had tossed the emptied bottle away and it had landed with a clatter some feet away from them did he take the time to look around. The frown crossing his features and the quiet uttering of curses told Loki that the man had finally realized that they were neither at the airport nor in his plane, but rather on a deserted path far away from everything that could be considered civilization. Stark's gaze finally fell, and locked, on his ruined and expensive car.

"Where the FUCK are we?!" the mortal hissed, a sudden rush of anger making him sit up as much as the wrecked suit would allow.

"What is this supposed to be? What have you DONE for Christ's sake?!!"

The sudden shouted imputations from the man Loki had just handed the last of their water to made anger boil inside him. The god was ungrateful, but Stark was even more so.

"I saved your worthless life! Those two men refused to get us a pilot and stairs after you collapsed, quite the contrary, they attacked me and tried to keep us from escaping while the police cars caught up with us! I had no other choice, think yourself lucky that I was willing and was able to heave you back into that damn machine!"

The two few silent for a few seconds, staring each other down, until Stark averted his gaze. "Oh fucking hell..." was all the human answered, the groan more directed at the world than at Loki, who just stood there, equally clueless about what to do now.

"I need to get out of the suit," Stark stated, voice still a bit hoarse, but now calmer than before, more due to exhaustion than from actual relaxation, "There's a tool kit in the trunk, bring it to me."

Loki did not know if he should yell at the mortal for ordering him around or be thankful that the inventor had given him something to do that did not involve standing in the middle of a desert and staring out into the distance... probably the first. But in the end, the god went to get the kit; Stark was really starting to look wasted and desperate to get out of the damaged suit.

With a metallic clang, the small suitcase was thrown down beside Stark and the inventor detached an outlet on his right arm to get rid of his right gauntlet, apparently using some kind of emergency-button.

Stark rummaged through the box and pulled some kind of automatic tool used to loosen the screws.

When the human began using it on the chest-plate, it slipped off several times, scratching along the already ruined metal. Apparently, Stark's hand wasn’t doing what he wanted it to do and it was trembling, the tool in his hand shaking more and more the tighter he gripped it.

Loki watched the scene unfolding in front of him for a couple of minutes before he decided that he’d had enough.

They were both tired and injured, yes, but there was no way they could stay here with no water and
no food. They had to move on, had to get some supplies and find shelter for the night, as well as a place to hide the prominent car. They may have escaped their chasers, but the god was sure they were still being searched for. Time was working against them.

"Give me that."

Loki aggressively ripped the tool out of Stark's hand, ignoring the inventor's screams of disapproval, and continued the billionaire work of loosening the suit's small and hidden. The screws didn't loosen as fast as he would have liked, but he worked with much more precision than the human had been able to muster in his current condition.

Luckily the mortal offered no further resistance, both him and Loki now so tired of bickering and screaming at each other, and Stark accepted his fate with as much dignity as he could muster. He lay unmoving and silent until he was freed from the useless metal that had once been his suit.

After removing several bolts they were finally able to remove the heavy chest plate, revealing the sweat-soaked and slightly bloodied chest beneath.

Loki noticed the way Stark avoided looking at him while he removed plate after plate of his armor, but could not tell if it was out of shame for his helplessness or because of his failed plan with the plane, which had almost ended their short trip in captivity.

"Two suits wrecked in a week, that must be a new record," the human said, simply for the sake of talking, when Loki was almost done removing the suit.

"Mmh," the god only hummed in agreement, not overly interested in having a conversation and pulled the last bolt out of the mortal's shoe.

"Clean up the mess you made in the footwell and get back into the car. I have no intention of spending the night out here in the desert."

"Yeah?! I'd rather be spending the night in my fucking plane!"

Loki did bother with a response; instead, he just started picking up the metal plates from the floor and throwing them carelessly into the already messy trunk, not caring what Stark was shouting after him. He was neither in the mood nor had the energy to put up with some pissed mortal.

Loki was sitting in the driver's seat, feet on the ground with his elbows resting on his knees, when he heard the rustling of sand and small stones behind him. He turned to watch Stark out of the corner of his eye as the human trudging forward to look at the footwell.

"What the-?!"

Stark grimaced at the sight of his own mess and muttered a whole train of curse words, turning away from the car and taking a deep breath.

Loki did not miss how Stark checked himself for any sign of dirt before he walked over to the trunk to get some paper towels. The sullied footmat was merely thrown out of the car into some dry bushes and Stark cleaned the remaining parts with the towels, throwing the crumpled paper away when he was done.

"Move. I'll drive."

Loki only response was to raise one skeptical eyebrow before moving to make space for the other man, keeping his objections to himself.

Considering their health, neither of them were really suited to drive at the moment, and the god
knew that. But he wasn’t about to object to a situation that would provide him with an opportunity to sleep.

With an audible grunt, Stark slumped in the driver's seat and started the engine which, after all the exertions it had been through, still responded with the same deep roar as always. But Stark’s accompanying yell of rage indicated something was obviously off.

"Fuck!"

Loki looked over at the inventor, not knowing whether the curse words even held any value considering the rate at which the inventor used them. Stark pressed his lips together and then accelerated, turning the car in a rapid sweep before driving them over the bumpy ground back towards the asphalted street. Once they were on it he sped up, pressing down on the gas pedal like it was personally responsible for the misery that was his life.

"We need to refuel, otherwise we'll soon be immobile. That means we have to find a gas station and that means we'll be making an enormously suspicious appearance in the otherwise dull life of a gas station attendant. You see what I'm getting at?"

A few miles of nothing lay ahead of them before a road sign told them that they were heading towards Thousand Oaks. Five miles later a deserted looking gas station appeared and Stark pulled over.

Inside the small building, Loki could see a face peeking out over a newspaper, attention obviously aroused by the engine’s noise.

"See what I mean?"

Loki could see what the mortal meant, and, since he was the one with the lesser known face of the two, there was only one option.

"Give me your shoes."

"What?"

"Your shoes, or do you expect me to walk out there barefoot? As if that would not be suspicious. You stay here; I’ll get us the things we need. Your face is too well known."

Stark opened his mouth as if he intended to argue, but he decided against it before even a word had come over his lips and pulled off his shoes, handing them to Loki.

The god tried not to look at the worn and dirty garment as he put them on his own feet, having to struggle a little to get them properly attached. His feet were very slim, but the shoes did not fit in length and therefore were pretty uncomfortable. At least he would not be forced to wear them all day.

"I’ll get us some food and water, and don’t you dare move from your seat, do you understand me, mortal?"

"We need to refuel first. And stop talking like I’m your fucking servant or something. This is still my damn car that we are sitting in and my damn money you are about to spend,” the mortal answered snarkily, annoyance unhidden in his voice.

The god did not respond to the insult, he simply lacked the will and energy to put up with the mortal's annoying pride.
"And how do I do that?"

"There is an opening in the car, on the right side. You unplug it, put one of those things over there into the opening, press the button on the far left with the red letters...you know what, I will do it myself. Give me back my shoes."

"You can not seriously intend to walk out of this car where everyone can see.-" "Give me back my damn shoes!" the mortal looked as if he was about to punch Loki in the face and, although it would likely not hurt very much with Stark in his weakened state, the god was not eager for that to happen. The atmosphere was already tense enough and, well, he had lived long enough with Thor to know when a stubborn person had made up their mind and could not be swayed.

He simply obeyed; he pulled off the shoes, tossed them carelessly back into Stark's lap, and left the car without further comment.

The man behind the counter stared at him with a curious expression as Loki walked into the store, but the god could not have cared less, it was just another unimportant peasant and so he let him stare.

"Hey, you need a doctor?"

Loki turned around to face the human, noticing that his eyes were not fixed on his face, but the smudge of dried blood on his shirt. Maybe he should have cared a little more.

"Mind your own business."

The mortal let out an unpleased groan at that, but turned back to the newspaper he was holding; the people here were likely used to weird strangers...even ones that had blood-stained shirts.

The little food the store offered didn't look very promising and was as processed as half the food in the supermarket had been.

The lists of ingredients on all the colorfully wrapped food were hardly more than recipes for chemically infested garbage.

The grease inside most of the bags looked disgusting and the food inside was pressed into weird shapes that were hardly recognizable; but the worst thing was the smell of all the food, which was hard to ignore once noticed.

It was no wonder that Midgardians were so weak, if they only lived on this waste. But it seemed that this was the only food he was going to get today, so he'd have to deal with it. He picked up a package of something that did not smell too bad and that proved to be some kind of dried fruits on further examination. Deciding that it was the best choice of everything offered, Loki took all the other bags and turned towards the door, waiting for Stark to enter.

The human had just finished refueling the car and was now entering the store, ignoring the interested looks of the cashier as he walked straight over to Loki. He grabbed the god’s upper arm and dragged him over to one of the racks, hoping it would look like they were talking about the thousands of different chips flavours.

"This is the perfect time to start saving money- I don't need that look from you right now, just listen. I've no idea how long we'll be running, but we'll eventually become short on money. Fuel is about $130, the car is a fucking gas hog, but we also need food and mostly water."

"I don't need to be lectured, Stark, what are you getting at?"
Even with their voices hushed and deliberately calm, the annoyed undertone was perfectly conveyed.

"I'll pay for fuel and for whatever it is you picked - Dried fruit? Are you kidding?! – and do a bit of small talk while you sneak out as much food and drink as you can get."

"You guys need any help?"

The man's voice sounded more curious than anything, but there was a hint of suspicion in it. Loki noticed how Stark tightened his grip on the god's arm before he slapped on a smile and turned around.

The irritated edge to the mortal's voice contrasted the mask of friendliness, but so what - they looked more frightening than friendly anyway.

"Everything's fine, thanks."

Stark turned back to Loki, frowning as he saw the smirk playing across the other's features.

"Stealing? That's the first good idea you've had so far," the god responded, glancing over to the man behind the counter.

As a god of mischief and trickery, stealing was almost an essential ability for Loki, he had done it a hundred, maybe a thousand times. He had stolen everything from simple sweets back in his childhood to rare artifacts later in his adventurous times together with Thor. And, of course, his magic had always aided him.

He raised his hand and stared at his palm, attempting to summon the necessary energy into his magic-lacking fingertips.

At first there was nothing, not even the distant tingle of electricity, but then he felt it.

It was only a faint flicker, a tiny spark of magic forming in his hands, pathetic in comparison to anything he had accomplished before, but it would be enough for now.

When the god looked back up at Stark, he saw the man examining him with a frown and a slightly suspicious look on his face.

"I collected magic."

"I see. I'm going now, so don't mess this up."

Stark threw him one last, meaningful look before he left Loki's side and walked over to the register, leaning on it to block the cashier's view of the door.

Loki meanwhile, started to collect random supplies from the shelves, aiming for big bags as well as some bottles of water from a nearby fridge. Having his arms stuffed full with everything within reach, he casted a spell, an illusion in front of his chest, that hid the stolen goods and made his arms appear to be loosely hanging by his sides.

The illusion was crude, flickering at the edges, and was two-dimensional so that it only worked in one direction - the direction of the counter - but the cashier was too busy to notice such little details anyway.

Only when they were back in the car did Loki let the illusion falter, the car’s doors and tinted windows hiding the stolen goods from view. That small use of magic had settled a deep fatigue
inside him, making Loki feel even weaker and more miserable than before.

Yet he tried not to let his exhaustion show as Stark walked out of store a minute later and got into
the car beside him.

"As much as I could carry," the god said before the human could even make a comment and
gestured to the supplies in his lap.

Stark nodded firmly at him, started the engine, and left the gas station before the man in the store
even had a chance to notice the theft or stop them from leaving.
At least one thing had worked out in the end.

Chapter End Notes

I held my promise, two chapters a week! I hope we can keep up that pace...

A big thanks to out Beta Yue 1234!
**Chapter Summary**

Tony and Loki find a temporary place to stay, but have a certain disagreement how things need go.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before he had gotten in the driver's seat again, Tony had also put a bottle inside the trunk together with Loki's dried fruits, storing it between some of the stuff they had squashed into it to prevent it from clinking against anything and making Loki throw another fit. The thrill of carrying it to the car, casually hiding it from Loki's view behind his leg, was enough to pretend he did not realize how pathetic the whole behavior was.

He wondered a bit that Loki did not even throw him a glance at the fact that he had been at the trunk, but when he looked over to him after about three minutes of driving, he saw the god's eyes closed from exhaustion and his head leaned back against the head rest.

It was still a strange, surreal sight to have him there right next to him in the car, even though they had been on the run together for quite some time now. They shared minimum space since they had left the hospital with nothing more but a stolen car and a faint idea on what they had to do and he still knew nothing about the god. There was nothing which connected them other than sharing the same enemy and tired faces, scarred by loss.

Not that he needed anything more to know.

"No time for sleeping. Get me the white little tin out of the shelf in front of you. No big deal, just painkillers."

With a tired sigh that could as easily be construed as resigned, Loki rummaged through all the other stuff packed inside the shelf until a rattling sound indicated that he had found what he was looking for. The inventor swallowed two of them with a generous amount of water, then passed the bottle over to Loki and cleared his throat.

"You might have noticed that there's a difference between sitting in a wrecked car with a few supplies, continuously on the run and with no possibility whatsoever to access any internet-related technology on the one hand and having a well-provided lab to finally get working on what I signed up for in the first place on the other. Frankly speaking: we're up shit's creek after the disaster with my plane."

The way the trickster inhaled sharply when he mentioned the plane-thing said enough, and Tony interrupted him before he could say anything further.

"Brainstorming. You start."

"Why did you have to open the door for Rogers? We could have prevented this from happening, or-"

"There are many things that could have been prevented!", Tony snapped, louder than he had
intended to, loud enough to make the tired god flinch on his seat. He may have been calm right now, but he was that close to losing it if Loki should continue with this 'What if'-nonsense.

"It would have bought us some time - now we are here with nothing. You don't even have any of your equipment."

Tony's fingers tightened around the steering wheel, closing his eyes for a second, before it burst out of him again.

"I know what I don't have, for Fuck's sake! I was asking for solutions, not the problem itself!"

Loki eventually seemed to realize that upsetting the person on the driver's seat was not the right way to go, so he shut his mouth and just sighed exhausted with closed eyes.

For what felt like a minute, there came no answer and they were just driving. The heated and sticky air inside the car, the warm rays of the afternoon sun on his skin and the hum of the engine had a soothing impact and Tony felt his breathing slow down again.

He was just about to look over to the god again (he had the feeling he was already fallen asleep over there), when he eventually answered.

"Rest first. I won't come up with any ideas right now - and I don't know if you have noticed, but you are not driving straight."

"As long as we're not in a cloud of dust you don't feel the bumpy ground under your ass, I call it straight. ". Tony snapped, not as loud as before, though, and returned dutifully to his lane and fixed his eyes on the asphalt extending in front of them.

So, the god refused to rack his brain for a solution and left Tony alone. Whatever. Not that his own brain would knock out anything useful anyway.

As soon as silence had diffused in the lowly humming car, Loki had dozed off. One did not even need to look over to him to know that, the way his breathing slowed down and his movements ceased told enough.

Tony just kept driving, disturbing Loki only once when he fumbled for the sunglasses he knew to be somewhere in the shelf. Consciously or not - he could not really tell - they were heading towards Las Vegas now. The desert streets were mostly empty, nobody managed to pass them and only a few cars came towards them.

Not one police car was among them. Although they were in the middle of nowhere, driving in plain view like on a silver platter, it felt relatively safe. The thought was illusory, though, but it helped to relax a little, even more so when the painkillers dulled his headache.

As soon as his thoughts found a moment of relative peace in which he had the time to concentrate not only on the task at hand, but on the greater picture, he could not hold back a bitter chuckle.

This was by far the most pathetic, ridiculous way to approach a plan for revenge.

The worst outcome, amateurish, ludicrous even for a man like him, worse than he had done back then when he had been a teenager with far less serious problems. It was not fit for what the Chitauri deserved as a paypack, it was not fit for what he owed Pepper.

As if fate had finally discovered that he had been spoiled by success for way too long and now had radically cut his luck forever.

Still, he did not regret his decision. Not the fact that he was driving with a maniac like Loki, not that he had repelled his friends, not that he had stolen and probably killed. It should have itched him at least a bit, but it did not.
For the first time since months, he felt a something again. A dark, hidden force which drove him to action and assured, that whatever it would take, he would taste the blood he craved for. No way he would let that feeling go.

"What the hell...", he mumbled huskily to himself, chuckling again and shaking his head in tired disbelief. He did not wake Loki up with it, though.

Las Vegas welcoming him with her famous sign was a sight he was used to. He had spent and wasted a lot of time in America's great gambling hell, lost and won whole fortunes and gambled with sums other people never made in their entire life. Each time had been different, yet the situation he was in now outdid all others from before.

At least, a fancy sports car, even a wrecked one, did not arouse any attention at all here in Vegas.

It was dark by now, but you could not see stars. The sky was illuminated by the blinking and blinding lights of the casinos, advertising the time of one's life - if you only had your lucky day. Remembering the nights he had spent here, getting smashed and making money, fueled a sudden desire to get the whiskey out of the trunk and also reminded him that he could really need a big, comfortable king size bed. He delayed those desires for later and let his eyes wander over the masses of curious rubbernecks from all around the world admiring the scenery. The sight was familiar to him by now, more annoying than inviting at that point of his life, but somehow he felt like he should wake Loki to make him see.

"End of the line.", he announced, which did not wake the god as quickly as a sudden slam on the brakes and loud honking did, as some jerk in front of him decided to make an u-ey on the middle of the street.

"By Valhalla, could you not-

"Son of a bitch.", Tony interrupted him cursing, then returned to explaining as if Loki had not said anything.

"Ever heard of Vegas? There's basically nothing else here than casinos, restaurants and hotels. And millions of freakish people. Might be just the place to get some undisturbed rest."

Perhaps one or another connection, too. There were more than enough shady specimen around here, not the ones to make deals with if you had a reputation to loose, but that was out of the question recently, so what. Yet, he would wait with telling Loki of that idea. It was the last straw, a thought he had come up with the second he had read the city name on the road signs first. Maybe Loki had a better idea.

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After having been so rudely wakened, Loki intended to fall back asleep - his body surely demanded it - but when he noticed where they were, his fatigue was forgotten for more than just a moment. The last time he had been awake, they had been in the middle of the desert: plain sand, distant blueish mountains and a bright, sunlit sky above them.

It seemed as if they had driven right into another world.
Bright, colorful light was blinking from all sides, not warm and soothing like the luminescent skies back in Asgard, but more obtrusive, burning into the god's eyes like fire. The street they were driving down was crowded with all kinds of valuable looking cars, the lane itself constricted by high buildings and strange monuments from all sides, towering into the black and starless night sky.

There were fountains, splashing water in artistic patterns, ugly commercials blazing down onto them with their artificial lights - and humans, humans everywhere. Men dressed in fancy black suits, women with long dresses, but also such Loki recognized as hookers and strays that looked almost as wrecked as Tony and himself and had definitely consumed more than a decent amount of alcohol.

It was a place unlike anything Loki had seen before, which meant a lot, considering his age.

Yet, he did not like it, not the least, it was much too crowded, too spoiled, too disgusting in every manner. Loki could smell the stench of alcohol, vomit and evaporations from the human bodies from outside, saw the masses of mortals moving all around him, felt betrayal and decay looming in every dark corner.

He had to admit though, that Stark was right. It was the perfect place to hide, better than every desolated shelter. The crowd would shield them, the sheer number of mortals gathered in this wretched place would make them disappear in their midst.

"Well, they won't find us here, at least not as easily as before. I would recommend you stop driving around and get us a place the rest."

"Easy, we can't just pick the first one on sight, those rooms cost more than we have right now and they would easily recognize me there. We have to go for something smaller."

"Is there any place on this planet where you won't be recognized?" Loki asked, frowning at the human beside him and titling his head, not really expecting an answer.

"Besides, why do you only have so little money? I thought you were considered kind of rich in your world. Or have you wasted all your treasures on booze?"

Despite all expectations, the comment did not hit the mortal like it had been intended, quite contrary. Stark chuckled, it sounded bitter and sarcastic, but it was a chuckling nevertheless.

"Even my liver has its limits. I don't know, if you have not noticed by now, but humans don't have shiny treasures made of gold, at least not most of them. We have bank accounts and mine has most likely been put on ice by now. They could have tracked us though it anyway, so it does not make a big difference. And now stop talking, you're giving me a headache."

For once Loki obeyed the human, his mind occupied what he had just heard about Midgardian money and trying to imagine what a so called bank account would look like. Minutes later Stark slowed down the car and turned left, following the street into some kind of cave... a cave full of cars.

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When the purr of the engine ceased, it suddenly became extremely silent. Tony stared through the windshield, completely thrown out of time and place for a few seconds, then he yawned flagrantly. He was awfully tired and his whole body felt just nasty and Loki's sudden interest in human finances really made his head sting.

The tense muscles and itching skin only emphasized the strong urge to simply grab his scalp and
tear down his skin completely to finally receive something like pureness again, even if it was nothing more but immense pain. He hadn't had that feeling for a few days now, days in which there had been only running interrupted by a comatose sleep, but now it was back.

Jesus, he needed a drink.

"Let's get outta here.", he said, looking over to Loki who observed the inner parking garage like it was the most mysterious place. Even though it would probably be entertaining, he did not want to hear what upset the god about the presence of so many unused cars.

"And where is it you intent to go?", Loki asked him moments later, when Tony was already rummaging through the trunk, gathering together their money. They had not even a damn travel bag to put their stuff into. Could look suspicious to a receptionist, but fortunately, this was Vegas.

"Looking for a preferably sleazy motel.", he answered, stuffing what would fit into the plastic bag, contentiously talking while doing so.

„You've probably seen the hookers outside. Since it's not allowed to simply have them on the streets – not yet I might add - guess where their customers take them. Same goes for drug deals and everything else which you shouldn't do publicly."

"You pay per hour, prices are sensationally low and since everybody knows what crazy shit is going on there, nobody wants to have a closer look on you anyway."

After he closed the trunk with a bang and locked the car – estimate one of the most expensive down here – he caught Loki's still skeptical glare. Probably amazed and disgusted by the existence of such places and his companion's extensive knowledge about it at the same time.

„Let's just hope nobody steals a damaged R8.", the inventor mumbled with a last look at his car and turned to go. Not that he had a lot of feelings for the car, not anymore, but it was by far the best wheels they could have right now.

In silence, they left the parking garage and went outside. They were off the crowded and busy main boulevards and walking through a more rundown part of the city. The casinos here looked like it was more likely to run into a current gunfight than win half a penny in them. He had never been here before, not consciously at least, but he knew enough of the city to know how things like that worked. Not once he stopped to turn around for Loki, the god was able to look after himself and with the outlook of having a minibar, a shower and a bed (in this order) at his hands in a few minutes he became a little single-minded.

„This one looks affordable."

Flickering neon sign, ill-lit lobby with a shabby looking receptionist absorbed by the action movie running on mute on his television. All standards satisfied.

„Oh, wonderful...“, he heard Loki sigh behind him when they entered. He could imagine the god would rather spend his nights in the wilderness with the stars above his head, but this was not Lord of the Rings here. Nothing doing.

„Shut up and try not to look too bloody.", he commanded whispering – not that the receptionist would make the effort and look at them anyway – then he stepped at the counter.
„One two-bed-room for one night.“
„Just double-beds.“
„Great. One of that then, one night.“
„49$, Room 34.“
„Thanks.“
„Mh.“

That had been easy. Not even a suspicious look or one of these slightly longer glares from which you could tell that the person recognized you but just did not know where from. Nothing, just plain business, quick and anonymous. Easily the greatest accomplishment of mankind so far.

„I advice you not to touch the toilet seat in any kind.“, Tony mumbled when they were at their door and he fiddled with the key to make it fit the lock. There was only a snort coming from Loki as an answer, before he shooed Tony’s hands away and took the key himself to fasten the whole procedure.

The floor as well as their room did not look downright dirty at first sight, but it was better not to take a second look. At least, they had what they needed for a night – although it was a double-bed again.

With a groan, the billionaire slumped down on the bed, inducing a loud protesting squeak from the cheap mattress, and sat there for a few seconds. Loki meanwhile locked the door carefully and then disappeared in the bathroom, from where you could hear him splash water in his face a moment later.

He listened to Loki’s quick wash for a few minutes, then did what his fingers were itching for the entire time now. Kneeling in front of the small fridge to get out the next best bottle together with a glass, he ignored that this would likely cause the other to throw another hissy-fit.

There was not much work to do that needed him to be sober any time soon.

Back on the bed, watching the liquid move in the glass with a thoughtful expression, he held it in front of his face for a few seconds, then tossed one down.

Only when the bitter taste eventually burned his throat in the most pleasurable sensation, he realized how much he had needed that.

Sweet heavens, how he had needed that!

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After several hours in a sticky and overheated car, the splashes of cold water felt like a small piece of paradise on Loki’s hot skin.

He took his time, filling his cupped hands with water several times, before he rubbed them over his face, cleaning it from the sting of salty sweat. He also poured the precious fluid over his hair, cleaned it from the dust, his hands and arms soon to follow.

As this parts were done, Loki finally found the courage to pull the white shirt over his head and examine the damage done to the wound on his abdomen.

Dried blood was smeared all over his extremely pale and sick looking skin around it, the wound itself was of the same livid red as in the morning - it was hard to think of it, it almost felt as if several days had passed since the shower in the house - but to his great relief not bearing any
glimpses of yellow pus anymore.

It still did not change the fact that Loki felt incredibly exhausted, yearning for the soft bed in the other room and a package full of these dried fruit they had just bought. Yes, this seemed a good idea; eating, then sleeping. Loki put his shirt back on and left the bath, switching off the light as he did so.

However, as he turned back to face the bed, his plans for the rest of the day were annihilated by the sight he got.

Stark was lying sprawled on the filthy furniture, half-emptied bottle (one that did definitely not contain water or any of these sugary drinks the mortal had consumed during their drive) in his hand, taking greedy gulps out of it as if his life depended on it. Somewhere on the desk, Loki also noticed an abandoned glass, which evidently had become a too complicated tool for the mere purpose of drinking.

It was actually something the god should have been expecting. Yet, a part of him had been convinced that he had managed to get the human beneath that stage of addiction. This was a huge step back for him, this was not planned and despite his own current reluctance to deal with the matter, Loki felt an anger towards the human boiling inside his chest with an intensity he had not known before.

The stupid mortal endangered their whole plan! And why? Because he was a pathetic, weak creature, beneath Loki's dignity if fate had not forced him to cooperate with him - but this, this was too much, something Loki would not accept. He had warned Stark about the alcohol before, had told him that he would face consequences if he refused to keep to that little rule.

Measures had to be taken.

With a few quick steps, Loki had crossed the room, torn the bottle out of Stark's hand - the weight indicated that it was really more than half-emptied, which was pretty extreme for the few minutes Loki had spend in the other room - and walked back into the bath where he emptied it into the basin.

"You insane little fucker, what the hell do you think you are doing?!", he could hear the mortal's yell from the other room, followed by the noise of feet hitting the ground and hurried steps towards the bathroom until Stark rushed inside.

The human bypassed Loki at first, diving towards the basin to see what had become from his precious booze, but as the man saw that there was nothing to be saved, that his life-elixir was irreversibly gone, he swiftly turned around, anger and hatred glittering in the brown eyes in a form Loki had not seen before.

It was easily to anticipate what came next and the god avoided the first punch, practically fleeing from the bath-room, out into the main room.

"Fucking bastard, I'm going to kill you, you fucking little shit!"

The enraged screams of the mortal followed as he crossed the bedroom and tried to turn to the side, crashing into the next wall instead. A fist met his skull only seconds later, uncoordinated but hard enough to let bright lights flash in
his vision and forcing as small pained scream out of his mouth. Loki turned around, punched back - hitting Stark somewhere between chest and shoulder- before the human jumped at him, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

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As the familiar blur had settled in, a deep relaxation had crawled in his limbs and the almost painful tiredness from before had changed into a warm, heavy weight on him, giving him the illusion of security he really needed. It would not have taken much, maybe one glass more, and he would have dozed off, but Loki's brute interruption had torn him from this state, back into the coldness of reality.

The anger had practically come from out of nowhere, drowning his vision red and letting him go from zero to rampage in a split-second. He did not really see where he was aiming for, nor did he know what he was doing or what these action could entail. It was nothing more but raw emotion, unfiltered by reason and let off the chain much too carelessly. In this condition, the cause could have been nearly anything - there was enough anger and hatred bottled-up inside of him.

Only the sheer momentum of his jump enabled him the advantage of staying on top for a while, uncoordinated trying to simultaneously hit or strangle Loki. He just wanted to make him shut up, make him suffer for denying him his release-in-a-bottle, for being another cause of his misery. "You little... piece of... shit!", he uttered between clenched teeth and ragged breathing, his fury only increasing the more the god beneath him struggled.

Yet, his strength was only a poor imitation of what he had been able to do months before and the alcohol slowed him down a great deal. He did not even manage to get his hands on Loki properly, was always parried before he could cause a serious blow and after a few seconds the tables turned and the other rolled on top of him.

For a man so lean, Loki was heavy and easily pinned him down with his weight, pressing the air out of his lungs for a second. His hand reached upwards to pull the god's hair, but was slapped away before he could get high enough and then suddenly, a fist hit his cheekbone, but the pain did only kick in belated, giving him a second to ram his knee upwards and hitting Loki's wound with it more by chance than by intention.

The god let out a choked scream and immediately a pointed elbow hit Tony's face and made his head bump against the hard floor with a painful-sounding thud.

Their struggle was only interrupted for a few moments of pained groans and heavy breathing before Tony grabbed Loki at his shoulders and slammed his whole body-weight against him to roll them over again, mindlessly carrying on with a fight which had no real aim.

Breath was already too rare to be wasted on spitting insults and all what could be heard in the small room was the strangled gasping of pain, enraged grunts and the ruffled noises of clothes against clothes, nails dragging into skin.

More and more, their fighting became uncoordinated and lame. The determination was still there, but the raging wrath from before which had fueled their energy was slowly but steadily fading as month-long malnourishment and emotional stress claimed the tribute from their bodies.

Soon, the two entangled bodies shuffling over the floor were reduced to nothing more but a ridiculous farce of what had once been a real fight over life and death.
If a punch hit its aim, it was because the other could not dodge quickly enough, but since the power behind most punches was far from impressive, it did not set an end to it. By now it was obvious that there would not be any winner at all, and as Loki - who had been straddling him again - eventually rolled from him and heavily leaned against the bed, Tony simply kept lying where he was.

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Loki was pretty sure that this was just the most pathetic thing he had ever witnessed in his long life; and the worst of all was - he had been part of it. Leaning against the bed, the god tried to regain his breath while at the same time attempting to avoid pained gasps coming from his mouth as the pain from his wound drifted more and more into his field of attention. He was only partly successful and had to bite down on his hand to avoid an agonized whimper.

No way he would not allow the human to have this little victory.

After a few moments, the god had eventually regained the strength to climb onto the bed, leaving the mortal behind him on the floor. He felt himself urged to say something, to mock and scorn the human for his utter weakness, his sheer inability to put up with the reality they were stuck in. Yet, somehow the god did not come up with anything, nor did he intend to waste any more of his breath for this wretched excuse of a conscious being down there.

Instead, Loki did what he had intended from the moment he had set food into this room; his hands found the small package of dried fruits - figs said the letters on it - tore it open and started to lazily chew the sweet nourishment.

He knew that there was a huge possibility of throwing up, judging from the pain in his stomach and the overall nausea, but he refused to accept that this long desired meal was taken from him because of Stark's idiocy.

The human still laid unmoved on the floor and a very cruel part of Loki hoped that he might have just died there, after that incident he actually doubted that anything would come about their collaboration. Maybe it was of greater advantage for him if he just killed the mortal, took the money and the car and got away from this place and find another scientist to build him a weapon. The idea was really tempting, but there was one little thing that kept Loki from smashing the human's head with that big iron statue on the nightstand.

He still owned Stark his life, the mortal had saved him from death, had not left him behind. Loki would permit Stark a last chance; but if anything happened again, he would end the mortal and take everything from him that was left.

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"It's not cool, you know.", Tony eventually mumbled from his position on the ground when his head had stopped spinning and his body had stopped aching. With a groan, he sat up straight, but did not look at Loki while he was getting on his feet again.

"Taking away a man's booze, I mean. Not cool."

"I warned you once."

Loki did not look at him, but simply munched the shriveled fruits. The arrogance with which he said these words - or maybe the arrogance Tony liked to interpret in his tone - made him already mad again, but he was way too tired to start something. There was just one thing he wanted:
Loki to shut his smug little mouth right here and right now.

The god had no fucking idea what it was like in his head, he had no idea that this was not about a nightcap or getting tired enough to sleep, but that this was a damn necessity. What was there else to stick his mind to in this depressing nightmare of a cheap Vegas motel? What should he DO for Christ's sake so he would not go crazy if he thought longer about the sheer hopelessness of their deadlock?

They were stranded, that's what they were, and it was just a matter of time until the whole little revenge-fantasy they had arranged would blow up in their face.

The thought of it alone caused a tight feeling in his chest, as if doubt grabbed his heart and squeezed it, vicelike, mercilessly. He had never really known doubt before, not when it was about something he could tackle directly. He clenched his fists, about to say something, to blame Loki again for their ridiculous plight, but then he changed his mind and vanished into the bathroom to do something he had not quite figured out yet, just to come back a second later, finger pointed at the still lying god.

"I don't give a shit on your warning. You don't know what you're talking about! You know what? You've got no idea what I'm capable of when I'm drunk."

"Stark, you're embarrassing yourself. Please, stop."

Loki had eventually sat up, looking at the billionaire with a mixture of tired pity and annoyance. He was plainly screaming to get punched again.

"You shut your fucking mouth already!"

God, he was terribly drunk, so drunk that he actually noticed it himself. Probably because he had not really eaten for the entire day. The violent pointing of his fingers already caused him to sway, but he just did not want to hold back.

"I'd build you the fucking weapon completely hammered, no problem in that, I got two of my doctorates on ideas I had when I was juiced up like anything, so you don't tell me I'm embarrassing myself. The only thing embarrassing here is the fact that our journey's greatest accomplishments so far are that we rented a room in a hooker's motel and I had the pleasure to plant my fist in your face."

Loki seemed to try his best to ignore him, since he kept his eyes fixed on the food, but Tony could just have went on and on and on without him giving him an answer. The only thing which shut him up was a strange noise. Low at first, almost tentatively, an amused snicker escaped the god's mouth, rendering the genius completely silent, staring in disbelief. Yet, this was true, Loki did not stop, he fucking laughed at him with increasing volume, until his pale face got some color.

Tony was about to explode; swaying, but all muscles tensed and ready to jump at the god.

"What the hell are you laughing at?!"

Loki did not stop himself from giggling.

"And what did you accomplish during the months you spent alone, rotting in apathy? A remarkable collection of shattered glass and a fly breed in your fridge? Do you think you are the only one who knows loss, who has suffered?"

"You are not, but you are the only one who is reacting in such an utterly pathetic way. If there
would not still be some valuable information somewhere in your head, I would not make myself the effort of spoiling me with your presence. You know what? Go ahead, kill yourself, I don't care - nobody cares, you made sure of that. Just stop this damn self-pity, it is tiring to endure."

Tiring to endure his ass!

He had lived long enough with himself to knew how tiring to endure this was, yet this knowledge had never stopped it from hurting and had never stopped him from yelling at whom he wanted when he wanted it. And now Loki, this little shit, was giggling like Tony was tonight's entertainment and the breakdown of his world only another story to amuse the god - fuck, it probably was, and the thought made him jump at Loki, scramble on the bed to beat him up like he was asking for.

Yet, the attack came to nothing.

Loki was quicker this time, pushing himself backwards before Tony could get him, but there was nothing he could have done anyway as a sudden rush of nausea made him halt immediately. His eyes widened for a second in unwanted surprise, then he swallowed, trying hard to fight back the feeling of sickness which had come from too much alcohol in too short a time.

"I dare you!"

The trickster's voice was sharp, but a level higher than usual, alarmed by the unpleasant possibility of vomit on his feet.

This time, Tony left it at that and withdrew from the bed in slow-motion, still with widened eyes and rapidly blinking, hand pressed against his head. He stumbled in the bathroom, no time to throw just one look at Loki, who was already chuckling again at this ungraceful exit.

The door slammed shut behind him, then he slumped against the wall, leaning heavily on the cool tiles. For a few seconds, his breathing was harsh and uneven and he needed to swallow a few times, but slowly the stimulus ceased again, sparing him the unworthy procedure of getting to his knees and plunging his head in the toilet bowl.

Even after he was feeling almost well again, he remained in his position, just feeling the smooth, cool surface on his skin and relaxing a bit. Although he deserved it, he would not come at Loki again, not today. He rather needed to calm down now, to give in to the pull of gravity which felt increased by at least 20 percent since he had emptied half a bottle of Whiskey. Mute and slow, he started taking off his shirt, then struggled with his fly so he could get his jeans off.

The clothes kept lying in a huddled pile on the floor when he stepped in the shower and when he accidentally turned on the cold water first and jerked under the gush on his skin, he decided not to turn the heat up. He did not need long for the shower, only carelessly scrubbed over his skin with the cheap hotel-soap and even though the effect on his well-being should be quite enormous, Tony only distantly realized what he did.

After he had dried himself with a towel, he tugged it around his waist and pushed the bathroom door open. "Whatever happens don't wake me and when I puke on you in my sleep I'm not sorry.", he said without looking at Loki, then he pulled the blanket from the bed, sat down on it and let himself fall on the mattress. Only messily he dragged the blanket over his body again, making it cover not even his whole
upper body. He did not really care that he was feeling cold or about trivialities like nakedness and sharing beds.

Facing the wall with Loki in his back, he closed his eyes and tried to mask out where he was or why he was there, simply let himself be dragged down in the blackness of sleep by alcohol and exhaustion.

Chapter End Notes

It's actually hard to tell for whom I feel more sorry for D:
Tony awoke with a start, torn out of his sleep by a nightmare which silhouettes already vanished before he could grasp them.

It was bright in the small room, the daylight from outside dampened by the fabric of the blue curtains.
Impossible to tell day and date like that.
Tony felt neither well rested nor motivated to move even an inch from his momentary position. He did not have a headache, which was surprising for itself, but he just felt incredibly heavy, sick and hungry at the same time.
So, he simply refused to do anything and just stared blankly at the opposite wall.

Until he remembered the situation he had fallen asleep in:
The pathetic brawl on the floor, the ridiculous words he had said, the weaknesses he had shown - in front of Loki.

He inhaled sharply, as if experiencing physical pain, and screwed up his eyes, then he rolled on his back, staring at the ceiling now instead of the wall and cursing inwardly.
Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.
The low rustling besides of him told him that Loki was awake, too, but for now, both men refused to talk to each other. Loki brought himself to it, first.

"Cover yourself, Stark."

"Hmm.", Tony grunted, looked down and then pulled up the blanket to his chest.
Not that Loki could have seen anything, but it was only a few more movements away. He was even farther away from giving a single fuck about it, but he did not look forward to hear any comments from Loki.
After what he remembered from yesterday, there were enough things the god could pick at.

"What's the time?"

"You are the one with the watch."

"Oh, right..."

He still had the expensive thing on his wrist, fortunately water-proof, saying him clearly that they had 2:09 PM.
His body seemed to finally understand that he needed to recover and that recovering meant sleep - and food. The rumbling of his stomach confirmed that and since there was no hint of rush in Loki's behaviour - he was still lying on his side of the bed unmoved - he got up and finally got himself the food he had needed for hours now.

Standing up, getting dressed in the same jeans from the day before (the stench from the shirt made him cast away the idea of wearing it again) and then grabbing himself one of the prepackaged sandwiches and a bag of chips also gave him a chance to get some space between him and Loki and the tensed, awkward mutual condemnation, still lingering between them.
When he walked past the mirror, he noticed the aftermath of the injuries he had received from the
Chitauri in form from faint bruises on his ribs. The attack seemed years away from now and in the same moment like yesterday - somehow time had lost its meaning.

Yet, it reminded him that there was still something which needed to be planned and therefore, he had to make a start. His head was surprisingly clear at the moment. Leaning in the doorframe, chewing the sandwich, he looked down on Loki.

"Don't feel special because I drunk-attacked you. Comes from doing a blind bargain.", he hoped the topic was finished with that.

"And after breakfast, we need to do something."

"What do you have in mind?", the god asked after a short moment of hestiation, sat up and reached for the half emptied package of fruit on the night stand. If Tony did not misinterpret, he actually sounded as if in a good mood.

"I know a few people around here which might help us.", Tony muttered, before he bit into his bread again.

Loki tilted his head.

"I presume that these people are not the most trustworthy ones?"

"That could go as a proper description.", he answered with a faint nod, not sparing the god a glance. He really did not like the idea he had had, but well.

The Asgardian continued to eat and so did he, both men silent and lost in their thoughts. After a while, Loki stopped eating, staring down at the dried fruits with an unsatisfied expression, before he eventually turned around to Tony again.

He had waited for this question since he had seen Loki starting to eat this ridiculous stuff.

"Would you pass me one of these?", the trickster asked as polite as possible, trying not to soil his dignity, gesturing at one of the mushy breads.

Although not overly fond of sharing, Tony merely grunted as a response and threw said object carelessly at Loki, who caught it and started to unwrap the plastic.

He needed a bit more time to eat than Tony did, but the inventor barely noticed. His thoughts were in the not too distant future, thinking of how he should approach said connections he was so easily telling Loki from.

As the god spoke to him again, Tony did not understood at first, until the other tugged at his blood-stained shirt another time, repeating his question.

"I can't go outside like that, I would gain to much attention. You have to get me something new, preferably something black whereon you can't see every single drop of blood. I will wait here."

Tony raised his eye-brows, but then only shrugged.

"Few days of travelling together and already caught in a routine."

He remembered that he had bought them both new clothes only days before which by now probably were all sealed air tight in some SHIELD bag to serve as means of evidence.

At least he still had that hoodie to cover the reactor's light, because even if he'd dye his hair or grow a full beard or anything similar ridiculous, everybody would know it was him anyway.

After emptying the Red Bull-can - it did not come close to his usual morning coffee - and throwing it in the bin with a clattering sound, he left the room without any further objections or comments.
Not that he was particularly motivated to go shopping for Loki again, but the blood-stain on his 
shirt really was an eye-catcher and, what was even more important: if there would be conversations 
of business today, they had to look respectable. 
A suit would've been nice, well, two suits, but their budget was limited and a bad-fitting suit ready-
made was worse than no suit at all. He cast the idea away.

Behind him in the long hotel hallway a door fell shut with a loud bang and some people had an 
agitated talk about some thing or another, but the billionaire barely listened. He was thinking 
again, his brain running on turbo to compensate his low-point yesterday.

Even before his months in Afghanistan, even when he had still been a weapon's manufacturer, he 
had refused to make deals with those people he had in mind now. Not that they had never asked for 
a business-partnership, not that they had never offered dizzying amounts of money for him to 
provide them with the latest Starktech. 
Even back then he had acted after a code of honor (that it was an delusional one had been covered 
up later) which had prevented him from making deals with this sort of people. 
They weren't trustworthy, as Loki had so conservatively put it, they would use any kind of 
weakness and any legal grey area in a contract for their own good. They were thriving for power 
and money, stopping at nothing for their goals - they were essentially not better than any common 
warlord down there in Africa, only that they had better resources, a thorough education and their 
thoughts were not clouded by a religious fantasy, but by greed.

Yes, he had always rejected them, but now they were their last chance.

He did not even feel any kind of remorse for this decision, it had come to him so naturally and 
quickly that it seemed like the only reasonable possibility. Not that he was cleansed from all moral 
objections, they simply did not apply to their case at the moment. He had a plan for this weapon in 
his mind the moment Loki had told him of his idea and all he needed were the tools and the 
premises to build it - making deals with criminals was merely a means to an end.

Leaving the hotel and crossing the streets which were not half as crowded as they had been on their 
arrival on this time of the day, Tony passed all the people without making eye-contact and without 
slowing down once. 
He entered the first available store and started skimming through the men's clothes, going for two 
black t-shirts and a black jeans for Loki (he would look like one of these skinny goth-kids, but fuck 
it) and a dark-red shirt and another pair of black jeans for himself. Just before he paid, he also 
decided to buy two jackets. 
Screw his former policy of savings - if this would work and they would decoy the people he had in 
mind successfully, they would not have to worry about money until they were finished. 
Again ignoring the interested looks the cashier gave him, he left the store and crossed the street 
again to get a pair of shoes for the god as well.

It was remarkable how focused his brain worked today. 
Not really with any motivation or emotional intention, but more solution-orientated, practical, a bit 
machine-like. He had to get his fucking shit together to get things going and the emotional wreck 
which had shown through yesterday was not helpful for that at all.

Being dependent on non-digital media now, he got the daily newspaper as well, just to check 
whether there was anything new in their search for him. There was nothing on the front page, 
which was extremely satisfying to see. 
It did not mean at all that they had stopped looking for them, but at least they would not make a 
public thing from it, so that they did not need to be on guard for watchful people.
It took him not more than 20 minutes to gather all these things, but when he knocked at their hotel room door, he had been away for a bit less than an hour.

Loki’s expression was consequently tense when he opened the door, his brows furrowed over his piercingly green eyes. He had obviously showered, his hair looked smooth and fresh again and he was not wearing his blood-stained shirt.

„Why did this take so long?!“, the god snapped as soon as he had locked the door again while Tony threw the bags of clothes on the – neatly made – bed. Except for a small package, from which he started to slowly loosen the plastic paper without looking at Loki.

„I was finished, when I had a little... spontaneous suggestion.“, he explained casually, before he removed the last layer of paper and exposed a black Glock 17.

„You bought a gun.“

It was not hard finding the skepticism in Loki’s tone, but Tony had been prepared for it and did not regret his decision in any kind.

„Usually I abstain from buying rival goods, yet with my suit not ready for usage before a complete make-over and us facing some sleazos in near future, I thought it reasonable not to run completely unarmed in the lion’s den.“

He turned the handgun in his fingers while talking. It was used and therefore cheaper than a new one, but it would do the trick just as good.

"Even though it's not the boss yet. Level 3 maybe, at maximum.”

A raised eyebrow was the only answer again.

Why did he even made the effort of making video game allusions when talking to an ancient Norse god? He should count it as a good sign, the fact that these references and snappy remarks still mingled in his speech without him being in a joking-mood at all.

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Despite his displeased behavior, Loki was glad in a way that Stark had needed a little longer than expected to gather the clothing. He was still severely exhausted, exhausted enough to fall two times asleep for a few minutes, before he gathered the strength and left the bed to take a shower.

The god was luckily done with the cleaning when Stark returned to the apartment, dressed as far as possible, appearing ready and awake.

Yes, it was important to appear strong and unflinching in front of Stark. They might have been allies in some strange way, nevertheless he could not allow himself to make a weak impression on the human, not with the struggle for dominance going on between them.

Therefore, he was everything else than pleased as Stark presented him the gun.

It was obvious that they needed a something to defend themselves, especially in their weakened state, with both of them deprived of their usual weapons, nevertheless Loki did not like the advantage Stark gained through this little object.

Without his magic, he could barely do anything, if the man decided to use the weapon against Loki, be it to force him into submission or gain himself an undisturbed time with his booze (which
he would not allow under any circumstances, not after the incident during the previous evening). He did not like that thought at all.

However, Loki hid every trace of concern from his features, his face an indifferent mask, and took a closer look at the clothing instead, trying to ignore the human fiddling with the weapon in his hands.

The black shirt was a little plain for his taste; especially compared to his former Asgardian garments with their layers upon layers of metal and leather; but it was still preferable to the red and sickly yellowish stained shirt, which had ended up in the bathroom-bin by now.

"Well, I suggest we leave this place. We should not stay too long at the same location if it is to be avoided.\text", the god said while pushing his arms though the black shirt, hissing as the fast movement made the stitches of his wound go tense against the skin. Hopefully he could get this things out in a day or two, stronger movements - not to mention fighting - were almost impossible with these threads sticking in his skin.

The shoes gained his attention seconds later and were quickly put on his feet. Even though they were a little short for his taste, they were more comfortable than they seemed from outside. Still; the design was a completely different matter.

Completely dressed, Loki slid out of the bed, gathered the two jackets from the bed - the god instantly decided that he would go for the gray one, not the dark blue - Thor had always used to wear dark blue garments - passed Stark and left the room.

He had to hurry the mortal as long as the man's eager mood was holding on. Maybe he was lucky and Stark would behave for the next day, or maybe – if luck was rare - he would find himself in a similar situation as an evening prior, only with a gun pointed at his face instead of a fist. Better not think about it.

At least the white machine was still in place as they returned to the car-cave - or whatever these places might be called - apparently also untouched. Both men got into the car without a comment to each other, Tony on the driver's seat as before (Loki did not want to admit it, but he had loved to have another opportunity to operate the machine), the god on the passenger's seat, and left the subterranean place with screeching wheels.

"Jarvis, have you got the address?"

"Sure, Sir.", the computer replied and Loki abruptly turned his head, as he heard a strange voice, which he did not know, but was apparently inside the car.

"It is alive?!"

"What, the car? No that's just Jarvis, haven't you two met yet?"

"No, not really...does...does he live inside the car?", the god asked, this time not hiding his sentiment of wonder at the strange encounter.

"He actually 'lives' everywhere I put him, which is mostly my tech. But this isn't about Jarvis. What was the address again?"

The voice replied to the question and Loki could not stop himself from staring at the screen where a map with their destination popped up, marking a route from their current position at the same time. Surprisingly, it took them only a few minutes to reach their destination; the streets were still full of
Loki noticed that Stark seemed tense, even more than usual. The way his fingers were idly fiddling with the key and how he avoided to look in the faces of bypassing humans told enough. Nevertheless, the mortal seemed determined, and he headed straight towards a wide stair which ended in an enormous door, doors which held the promise of money and resources behind.

The bright and colorful appearance of the place inside, the blinking machines and the joyful, yet not loud music playing in the background did not cease Loki's mistrust, quite contrary. Asgard had been bright and colorful too, but had also been full of danger and betrayal, exactly like this place; Loki had the bad feeling that the upcoming encounter would be more than risky than Stark made it appear to be, and that more than a careful and appraising behavior was required. Hopefully the mortal knew what he was doing.

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In lack of any better place to hide it, he had plucked the gun in the back of his jeans, where it now, safely hidden under his jacket, reminded him with every movement that there still was a way out - even if the cards were stacked against them. It would end in an embarrassing fiasco if they would insist on patting him down, but he could only hope that his name and what he had to offer would be enough to ensure a respectful treatment.

The casino they had just entered was familiar to him, the same opulent furnishing you found everywhere in the city, the same mixture of clients, everything from billionaires to those poor devils who spent their children's money on one-armed bandits. He himself had spent some money here now and then, but had always rather avoided the place, mostly because of it's owner.

With a quick glance he made sure Loki was on his side, then he halted for a few second in the foyer, letting his gaze travel over the large room. It was strange not to attract a hell lot of attention, since he usually entered places like these with a large entourage and more than a little bit tipsy. Now however he was sober, maybe too sober, and alone, except for Loki on his side whose expression was a studied casualness which was only betrayed by the intensity in his eyes with which he attentively observed the scenery.

Tony soon found what he was looking for.

In the back of the room, loitering at the bar, he could make out two young, frighteningly muscled men in dark suits. He did not recognize their features, but the way they were suspiciously maintaining a low profile while they were watching the room told him enough to know that they were the right ones to speak to.

"There, the two hunks at the bar.", he informed Loki, already making his way towards them, passing blinking machinery and crowded roulette tables without paying too much attention to them. He was far more busy with keeping his posture. Sure he did not have to be taught how to walk straight and keep any unwanted emotion from his face, but there was something that uncombed hair, an untrimmed beard and months of self-loathing and holing up did to people which you simply could not cover with a determined walk alone.

"Hey, there."
Shoving between one of the guys and his drink, Tony leaned on the bar-surface, letting the most casual of smiles flash on his lips for a second before his expression turned serious again and his gaze fixated on the taller guy's eyes. He seemed to be the one in charge, judging from the confused look the other had thrown him as if asking for guidance what to do now. The atmosphere had tensed in a matter of seconds and Tony felt the gun pressing hard against his back.

"What do you guys want?"

There was overt condemnation in that tone of voice, one question making sure who was the one who would get his ass kicked if he gave a wrong answer and whose foot would be buried in that ass. Tony pressed his lips together and kept his spoiled inner child in check who revolted against getting addressed in such a condescending way. Loki played the silent spectator, standing behind him and looking as princely as he had not looked a long time. Getting addressed like that by some kind of servants seemed to piss him off, too.

"We're here to have a business conversation with your boss."

There was not even a chuckle from the two guys. The taller one simply raised an eye-brow, but the inventor did not let him speak.

"I'm making this as short and easy as possible for you. If you haven't been blind and deaf for the last thirty years you may have recognized me as Tony Stark by now and even though I have to admit that this whole situation is fairly unusual, it does not change the fact that not so long ago Adams would have licked my shoes to do business with me."

“So, if you'd be so kind to escort us to wherever he has his swanky office, I'd abstain from telling him that you're standing in his way to make great money.”

There was a short moment of silence in which only the distant music and the omni-present ringing and clattering from the gaming machines could be heard, then the shorter one muttered "I knew that I remembered his face!"

"Well?", Tony added, putting all the impatience of a person who knew what was due to him in his voice. Yet, the other was not easy to fool and really, he would not be in his position if he'd let himself be ordered around by anybody who remotely looked like the hobo-version of a famous billionaire. The presence of a tall, thin and pale guy with long black hair at his side did not really add to any basis of integrity.

Tony rolled his eyes, then his hands moved to the top button of his shirt, unbuttoning it until the blue light of the reactor shone through. Even when he had seen the first inch of it, the tall one nodded approvingly and then gave a nod at his colleague who vanished from his seat immediately, obviously gone to tell his boss who was about to visit.

"The newspaper said they're looking for you.", the guy said, while he walked ahead of them, away from the public rooms of the casino through a door into the quieter hallways. Tony buttoned up his shirt again and ignored the statement, throwing another glance at Loki instead who had stayed silent the whole time. He was sure the god would be an intimidating negotiation partner if he was in full command of his magical abilities, but for now his silence was the best he could to.

"No surprise they can't find you with that beard you grow there."
Somehow, the atmosphere had not lost its tension yet. They were on their way to meet Adams, he was sure of that, but it still felt like they were walking right into a trap. It would have been naive to expect anything different. Only a blind or a saint would not cash in on the poor appearance they made and the man they were about to see was neither.

Tony did not feel fear, though. He was not afraid of scum, there was nothing they could do he would not be able to deal with. Although he had had his doubts in the beginning, the words came from his mouth as effortlessly as ever. The only thing which made him nervously lick his dry lips and fastened his pulse was the idea that there was no plan B if their offer would be denied.

They had nothing if this would not work.

The security guy stopped in front of an office door and knocked three times, then opened the door and held it open until Loki and Tony both had stepped inside, just to close it again and position himself in front of it with crossed arms.

Well, fuck.

"Never in my life I would have thought to see you again, Mr. Stark. I have to say that you look less... impressive than in my memory."

The man behind the wide desk had stood up the second they had entered the room and was now encircling the piece of furniture in slow steps, intensively observing his unexpected visitors with a faint, cold smile on his lips.

He stopped just in front of Tony, taller than him by almost a head, to give him a quick hand-shake which was more a gesture of dominance than politeness.

"Funny though, you still look as unimpressive as I remember you.", the billionaire answered dead-pan.

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In his thoughts Loki screamed at the mortal to stop teasing the other man, but apparently, this kind of approach was just the right way. The mortal called Adams commented the ex-billionaires comment only with a bored smile, before his blue eyes focused back on Stark's face, assessing, almost with a predatory expression.

"Isn't it quite odd? Only two days after your disappearance you surface in Vegas, seeking out my support. Oh, don't give me that look Mr. Stark, it is obvious why you came here. Did you know they wrote you've been abducted?

Quite an interesting story, although it is widely presumed that this is not the complete truth."

The man's piercing eyes shifted over to Loki for an instant, then he averted himself completely from Stark and Loki, slowly striding back to the huge glass wall at the other end of the room.

"I'm truly excited to hear the full story behind this little encounter. I especially want to know what could possibly coerce the great Tony Stark to seek out my help, while he refused even the slightest cooperation all the other times before."

It put Loki to shame that he had not seen it coming, but the movement the man made with his hand, or more precisely with his finger, was just too small, too subtle for the exhausted god to notice at the right time.
Men from two sides were rushing towards them, had Stark and him by the arms and pressed them down onto their knees before any of them could put up a fight.

The gun was easily plucked out of Stark's back pocket and the bodyguards's hands ran over their both bodies in search of other hidden weapons with a swiftness that told how often they were doing this.

"Hey, what the hell?!"

Stark was silenced as a gun was violently shoved against his temple, metal meeting bone and skin with a dull sound, his entire body going rigid at the contact.

Loki merely hissed at two men in suits as he was forced to kneel in front of the grey-haired mortal, but ceased the noise as a gun was pointed at his forehead, actually low enough to be aimed at his left eye.

It was unlikely that the shot would kill him on instant, though a fatal head injury and a missing eye was the last thing the god needed right now. There were enough wounds that weakened and slowed him down and there were better none to be added.

So, he stayed put and endured the treatment, even with every fiber of his body protesting against the humiliation that was forced upon him.

"That little alcohol escapades of the past months really seem to have left some serious damage in your mind, Stark. What did you expect by coming here? That you might gain help from me, now where you don't have anything left, reduced to nothing more than a fugitive? You don't have any money, you don't have your company. The only thing you are still worth is the money that is set on your head and that device in your chest – but don't worry. I'm a fair person and will be willing to give you a chance, if you only give me one reason to spare you."

Adams had returned from his position near the window and came to a stop only a few inches away from the two kneeling men, gazing down onto them with a satisfied smirk on his face.

Loki's fingers itched to summon his magic and tear that smile of the mortals face, but his magic was weak, utterly useless and barely enough to keep the healing process in his body running.

Also, there was still the fact that they had come here for a certain reason; and killing one of the only persons who had access to those needed goods was an overally bad idea.

"You asked for weapons back then in 2005, right? I might not have my company anymore, but everything is still there. In my head, I mean. I can build you every single weapon my company has ever produced - if I get money and some required parts."

Even though they had barely spent more than four days with each other, Loki knew the mortal good enough by now to sense how hard it was for him to speak those words.

There was loathing hidden under the calm surface of his face, well hidden anger, a slight twitch of fingers, fingers that wanted to close around the neck in front of him and squeeze hard, unyielding, until the superior glittering in those blue eyes turned dull and dead.

It was a shared sentiment.

"Odd how the tables can turn within a few short years, is it not? And all it took was the death of one woman."

Stark's body twitched at the last sentence, his facade crumbled and his eyes went wide in anger and terror, but the small outburst was gone as fast as it had come as the gun was pressed more firmly against the human's skull.
"Still a sensitive theme I see, but I like your attitude - back the the old days, right? Maybe I might still have a use for you."

"So let's get this right: I give you the material and provide you with a place to work. In return, you will build me a suit. Not one of your weapons – I could get them easily if I'd liked to. When you're done, you get the money you so desperately need. Sounds fair, doesn't it?"

Stark gritted his teeth, appearance fighting down every usual impulse of defiance when Adams dictated the conditions of their bargain, so obviously sure that he was the one in the position to do that. Yet, despite all the humiliation they had to go through to reach that small success, it was exactly what they needed.

Well, almost.

The mortal slowly shook his head, carefully avoiding to touch the metal of the gun with the movement, then he looked up to Adams again, all emotions swiped from his face, except for a grim determination.

"You're kidding, right? I'll neither work with a weapon pointed to my head nor will I subordinate to your ridiculous little revenge-game. You should thank the heavens that such a deal falls in your lap like that."

For the first time in this conversation, the gray-haired man uttered an amused laugh, too loud, too intrusive in the otherwise silent room. His eyes were glistening dangerously when he looked down on Stark again, the corners of his mouth still pulled to a mean grin.

"Just for once: Shut your fucking mouth, Stark. It's a virtue, to know when one has lost. You should thank me that I won't hand you over to one of the many parties searching for you. Or just kill you here and now, but I fear that would actually be the thing you're craving for."

Nevertheless, he made a small wink with his fingers and in the same moment, both Loki and Stark were grabbed on their shirts and pulled to their feet again.

The inventor gave Adams a strained, but dismissive smile when their hands met again to seal their bargain, not averting his gaze from the blue of the other's eyes until the taller man pulled away and then turned around towards Loki whom he had neglected so far.

Now on eye-level, he had to actually raise his head a little to look directly at him and that gave Loki at least a certain satisfaction.

"And who exactly are you? Can't remember having seen that face around your omnipresent visage before, Stark. What's your role to play?"

Stark tensed up when suddenly the god was the center of attention, but Loki did not falter under the mortal's piercing gaze, he had endured and won staring contest with creatures far more dangerous than this human. The day he submitted to a lesser being, like this man, had yet to come.

"I am an old friend of his.", Loki answered, the lie rolling of his tongue like honey. He stared unblinking into the eyes of the human, a faint smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. Adams eyes twitched, then he averted himself from the god. It was an obviously unsatisfying answer, but the mortal apparently chose not to dwell further one this question. At least not right now.
"Good. So, would you please show our guests their new home?"

Adams waved at two men from a corner of the room, who guided, or rather pushed the two of them through a door, weapons pointed at them.

From the corner of his vision, the god saw how Adams held one of the men back to tell him something; and although he did not hear anything of what was said, Loki was pretty sure it was concerning him. He lost sight of the scenery when they were urged around a corner, walking down the hallway to a place that held two big cars - vans, Loki remembered the name.

One of the men opened the doors at the end of it, while the other, who had caught up with them only a couple of seconds before, subtly raised his weapon, forcing them to climb inside. Loki and Stark obeyed - what else could they have done? - and the door fell shut behind them, leaving them in darkness.

"Shit. Shitshitshitshit." Stark uttered, his voice hushed but still dripping from anger and frustration. "It wasn't supposed to go like this, shit!"

The human paced from one end of the van to the other, stopping in front of the wall, lifting his legs to kick the steel, hesitating only inches in front of apparently coming to the conclusion that it would only cause further pain and a far worse mood, if that was even possible.

"Calm yourself, Stark."

"The fuck I'm going to do! Do you have any idea how deep we are covered in shit?! We won't get to see a damn penny from Adams!"

"We have an advantage." Loki answered calmly, sitting down on the bottom of the van and watching Stark with an amused glint in his eyes.

"Where do you see any advantage here? We are fucking captives!"

"Our advantage is that they are underestimating us. They have no idea who exactly they are dealing with, nor do they know of the full extent of our capabilities. Adams is playing in our hands by providing us with the required resources and by hiding us from those who try to stop us in our quest. The moment he will notice his mistake, it will already be too late."

Stark had stopped his pacing by now and was now staring at Loki with a thoughtful expression. The god's words seemingly had the desired effect on the mortal.

"That will only work as long as they don't have any idea what I'm building."

"Stop worrying, I have a plan."

"Mind telling me?", the human asked, less angry, but still frustrated. Though there was something else in the way he looked at Loki, he was not sure how to name it but it seemed like... curiosity.

"Not yet. Patience is our friend now, so don't do anything impulsive."

The demand earned Loki only a grunt from the mortal, who let himself drop to the floor a few feed away, head limply hanging forward, tired.

A rumbling noise and the vibration of the walls around, told that the car's engine had been started, seconds later Loki felt it moving beneath him.
We have to apologize that the friday-update was skipped, but last exams at university claimed their tribute...
Steve had no idea how long he had been staring at the white ceiling above him. Probably long enough to remember every little stain, every little uneveness, every tiny speck of dust, had there just been any. However, this was a S.H.I.E.L.D facility, so every wall, every ceiling was perfectly white and smooth, a plain surface with no details to be found. It was not like he could not have done anything else. Even though he had some serious injuries that were not to be underestimated and might have even killed a normal human being, he was not bound to the bed. He had a television and a tablet in his room to occupy himself; someone had even brought him some books, Steve just did not feel like doing anything, his mind was occupied by other things, questions upon questions which demanded to be sorted out. The incident in the mansion had only been two days ago, yet his wounds were mostly healed by now, thanks to the supersoldier-serum in his cells. A few broken ribs and a broken skull, along with some other minor injuries – nothing he was not used to. It had been two days in which he had barely moved, always repeating the same question in his mind.

What on earth had driven Tony to these actions?

At first Steve had been angry at his (once)-friend, even more when he had heard about Tony bringing down a S.H.I.E.L.D helicopter during his escape, about the fact that he had killed without hestiation. Later however, he had started to wonder, whether Tony's behaviour had been his own fault. It was tempting to blame Loki for everything that had happened. For most people he was the responsible one anyway, since it fitted to the image he had left in people's heads before he had disappeared with Thor, back then in New York. The theory went the rounds that he had taken control over Tony - a theory Steve refused to believe.

It had been Tony who had tried to talk him into leaving, Tony who had attacked him and injured him - not Loki, who had seemed as anxious and insane as the last time they met. No, the god was only partly to blame, for it was him who had obviously convinced Tony of some kind of plan, whatever it might be.

Tony had been on the edge for months now, so maybe a manic, revenge-craving god had only been the last missing factor to push him completely over. It was stupid and he knew it, but Steve had the faint feeling that he could have prevented the whole disaster had he just been attentive enough. He blamed himself that he had not given Tony more attention, that he had not done more to drive the alcoholic out of his isolation. Even though he had no idea how 'more' could have looked like, given the dozen other duties he had.

Yet, as he was laying here now, mulling the question over for the umpeenth time, Steve slowly came to the conclusion that he had done everything in his possibilites: He had spend almost every free minute in the isolated mansion trying to pry the billionaire away from his booze. He had called him every day, no matter whether he had been fighting for hours, no matter if he had been injured or tired to death.
He remembered those nights well, nights in which he had spent hours lying on his bed with the mobile on his ear, listening to Tony's slurred talks, his affronted silence, sometimes, if the night was a particularly bad one, to his strangled sobs.

Despite their rough start, Tony had meant a lot to him after the battle of New York. The engineer had loved to introduce him to new technology and the odd customs of the 21st century (in his own way which was sometimes difficult to understand for Steve). Tony had been his closest friend after Bucky and it had been frightening to watch how a person so self-confident as him could change to a wreck like he had been the last months, only by the death of another.

For Steve it was out of the question, that Pepper's death had been the one thing which had damaged Tony to an extend where he could not recover from.

Had it only been the devastating attack on the east coast, the destruction of Stark Tower, or even the loss of his company, Tony would have shrugged it off, he would not have given up. He might would have suffered, but nevertheless found a way to go on, because he knew that Tony Stark would never give up if there was something to fight for.

Yet with the loss of Pepper, Tony had not only lost the most important thing in his life, but also his purpose, his will to continue fighting.

The billionaire and once-owner of Stark Industries had become world-weary, Steve had seen it in his eyes. These eyes, usually so full of sparkling wit, had turned dull since Pepper's funeral, the wish for death reflecting in the brown orbs.

Tony had choosen to kill himself, not in a direct, quick way like other people did, but through a slow and agonizing one.

Upon every call Steve had feared that the billionaire would not answer anymore, that he was finally deceased somewhere in a corner of his mansion and with every failed attempt to drag Tony away from the booze, the supersoldier became aware that it would end like this sooner or later. He could not stop Tony from drinking. No one could.

However, if the current situation was more desireable in any way was the question; since now Tony had turned from a threat for himself to a threat for everyone.

There was no way around it: Tony needed to be stopped - and Steve would be the one to do it.

"Still sulking?"

Lost in thoughts, Steve had not heard the director approaching. Only as the tall dark man entered, black coat moving behind him, he turned his attention towards the door.

Fury was a rare sight there days, since the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D spent most of his time in the headquarters in the West of China, an isolated, but therefore secure base hidden in some unknown place the mountains.

"Not sulking, Sir, only thinking."

Steve's answer came mechanically and his eyes found the tensed and weary face of the other man only slowly.

"Have you found anything yet? Any sign of them?", he asked mere seconds later, not really expecting an useful answer. Therefore, he was more than surprised as the Director responded.

"We found the car, including some cash, junk-food, but most important: the complete Mark V suit."
Steve frowned – that sounded weird. Either it was some kind of trap figured out by Tony and Loki or maybe something had happened to them - or – what was the likeliest - S.H.I.E.L.D agents had just been lucky.

"Where did you find it? And the suit...?"

"The car was found abandoned in Vegas, no sign of Stark or Loki. I already sent Barton... and Romanov, too, for that matter. And no, there was nothing suspicious about the suit. It is a total wreck."

Steve's eyes widened for a second when he heard of Natasha. He had not heard anything from her for weeks now, not even rumors, as if everybody in S.H.I.E.L.D. had suddenly forgotten about her existence.

Fury did not even bother for a satisfying explanation.

"She was on a mission, but now I decided she is probably of more use for us here."

Steve slowly nodded, relaxing at these words and staring at the wall in front of him for a couple of seconds, before another thought crawled into his mind.

"Will they kill them? I mean, we don't have enough facts to know what they are up to to decide-"

"I'm going to tell you the facts, Mr. Rogers: We have an alcoholic in possession of dangerous knowledge concerning weapons and internal affairs of S.H.I.E.L.D and a homicidal, manic Norse god wielding a fucking cosmic cube of unlimited energy running fucking amok on our streets!"

"So, yes, Barton and Romanov have the permission to kill - at least Stark. Admit it, Rogers, there is not much difference anymore if Stark dies from an arrow or his own vomit. His days are counted, and Loki will follow him the second we have the fucking Tesseract in our hands. There is too much shit going on right now to make vain attempts of rescuing a man who does not want to be rescued. You have seen it from closest range, so tell me I'm wrong."

Fury was right.

Steve knew it, knew that Tony was beyond a point where he could return to anything close to his former self, and yet he still did not want to give him up. Not even after Tony had attacked him with a brutality Steve had never expected from him.

"Let me find them. I will see what I can do... Last time I just approached it the wrong way."

"No."

Fury's answer was short, and sharp. There was no point in arguing here, no way of convincing the Director of another way.

"I have another job for you. Banner has recently been spotted near Delhi and we need you there."

"Banner? I thought he did not want to work with S.H.I.E.L.D any longer. I hardly think I can convince him of returning."

Fury sighed and averted his gaze for a second in a way which let Steve know something unpleasant was about to follow.

"We are not in the position to merely try and convince Banner."
Steve's eyes widened in shock. In an instant, he was sitting straight up in bed, every muscle tensed.

"You can not really intend to...!"

The last words were stuck in his throat, but Fury took pity on him and completed the sentence.

"...capture him? Force him to fight? We can and we will, Rogers. Our world is on the brink of destruction through a force we can not hope to defeat."

"Do you know how many people have been killed by Chitauri since the first contact on the May 4th of 2012? More than 1,6 billion - and that is only the offical count. If the attacks continue in this quantity, unpublished estimations say that humans will be extinct in a matter of three years, maybe with a couple millions ending up as slaves or food.

This is not about the preferences and issues of one person, this is not about America, or any other fucking country in this world. This is about the survival of humankind. The Hulk is one of the rare forces that has the ability to kill these fucking bastards efficiently in populated areas and without the use of nuclear force."

Steve swallowed hard, staring at Fury for a few moments longer, then he averted his eyes again.

"Are we clear, Rogers?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Thank You."

Fury did not wait a second longer, there was no time for a man in his position nowadays to wait longer than necessary.

This was war, and even though Steve would have never thought it possible, this was worse than the war he had fought in in his other life:

The entire Eastcoast was lost, leveled by alien attacks and atomic bombs, there had been no messages from Middle Europe, Japan, North Africa and East China for months now and other parts of the world - India, South America, most of the Asian continent as well as the remains of what had once been the continent of Europe - under a never ending row of devastating attacks, claiming more and more deaths with every day.

Nobody had a clue where the Chitauri-ships were exactly positioned. They were somewhere there, in the orbit, but neither the satellites – those of them which had not been destroyed by the alien attackers as well – were able to track them, nor did humanity have rockets with enough power to reach any further into space.

All what was known was that the Chitauri were attacking the places on earth with the highest population densities, mercilessly, seemingly with endless resources of powerful soldiers.

Nobody knew exactly why and nobody had an idea who was leading them, but with every new day it became more likely that they would win and sucessfully wipe out humanity - whatever purpose this might serve.

Chapter End Notes

Yaay a Steve chapter!
Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki get introduced to their new home.

They were driving for about an hour or so, the dim glow of his watch told him the exact amount of
time in the otherwise completely dark interior of the van.

After a few minutes, the eyes adjusted to the lack of light and Tony could make out Loki's
silhouette on the other side of the vehicle, hunkering there with his back against the wall. He
remained silent for the rest of their drive, not minding to tell his companion at least the outlines of
his so-called plan.
The inventor hated it that he had to rely on somebody else's brain, to be dependent on other ideas
than his own. It made him almost physically feel the last remaining piece of control slip through
his hands, but at least they had a chance.

He really could need some silver lining right now.

When the van came to a jarring halt, Tony was torn from his thoughts and his eyes snapped open
again.

Only a moment later, the doors were opened without much care and the white, sterile light of neon
tubes flooded the blackness of the car's interior. He squinted his eyes when he left the van,
following the silent order of waving guns and crude pushing.

The room they were in was big, definitely subterranean, without any windows and only
unsympathetic concrete walls to look at.

Light came only from the before mentioned neon tubes which illuminated some machinery further
in the back, mostly bigger machines which looked a bit dated and like they had not been used a lot.
Seemingly a store-room, some kind of cellar, probably under the floors of a great plant or the like -
impossible to say where they were exactly.

"Nice move, putting us somewhere underground. Bet that was the last time we saw daylight before
our work is done.", Tony mumbled to Loki, not looking at him, since the guards looked like they
were just waiting for a reason to ram their weapons in somebody's face.

"We can only hope that Adams is as effective with keeping people from his premises than he is
with keeping us down here.", the god replied sternly.

They stopped in the middle of the room and Tony could see the whole complex now: Three doors
going somewhere (probably upwards), one roll-up door where they had entered. Of course,
cameras in every corner - he bet they would increase their number as soon as they started working.

It gave him chills when noticed the similarities between this situation and his work in that dusty
cave in Afghanistan - only, that this time, he had deliberately put the rope around his neck himself.
Yet, as a working environment, the room was almost perfect.
With more tech, a coffee machine and blaring music, it could almost be comparable to his
workshop. But this was only an idle wish and he had no fucking time for idle wishes.
While he had been observing the surroundings, the guy from before, the casino-hunk, had stepped in front of them with crossed arms. He looked not really convinced of the whole situation. His eyes were fixated on the two weirdos he had to watch now, just because his boss was keen to have his revenge with them.

It was not really subtle, the way his whole body language screamed: I don't trust you.

"So, the boss told me you can list the stuff you need to work, he'll get you what's necessary."

Wordlessly, Tony took the papers and the pen from him and nodded, glancing towards Loki now and then, while the guy continued explaining the house rules.

"One of the doors leads to sanitary facilities, food will be cared for by us. As long as my boss does not want you to do anything else, you stay down here to do what you have been brought here for."

His casual tone suddenly changed and he stepped a few inches closer, his expression hardened with open scornfulness, the don't-fuck-with-me-glare you had to master before you could even consider a career as a criminal.

"And I mean it: You WORK. We will look after your progress, we'll check whether you fuck around or work properly. There is no chance you do anything else than fulfilling your part of the deal. NO BULLSHIT. You understand that, little mastermind?"

He tapped his gun against Tony's head in a derisive manner, causing only a tired grin from the man. This was so C-level villainy, he had dealt with bigger shit - perfect example stood right next to him.

"You make yourself very clear, yes.", the billionaire answered coldly.

"And you too?", the guard turned around almost rapidly, pointing the weapon at Loki's chest. The god played along as well, nodding with a sweet smile that was worse than any actually spoken insult.

"Good. You've got an hour for the list, I'll leave you alone for that."

He whirled around, giving a few hand signs which ordered his men to enter the van again. Tony did not even wait until the car was completely gone and the doors were all shut again, he just sat down tailor-style right where he had been standing and started scribbling on the piece of paper in his tiny, messy handwriting, shutting out Loki's presence for the time being as he remembered the basic tools he needed by heart.

First, the most basic devices, those you could get in every hardware store, then computers, miles of wires and tons of multi-sockets, the right lighting, work desks, then more advanced machinery, smaller robots he had usually build himself back home, then the right material, metals, alloys, et cetera et cetera. He was bold enough to demand furniture as well, although his hopes that Adams would agree on getting him either a couch or a hi-fi system were limited.

"Any special wishes for the great shopping party?", he asked, the pencil between his lips, whe he was done after five minutes, then he looked up to Loki.

"Haven't got anything particular for our real project yet. Since we've got exactly 53 minutes from now, we should agree on something pretty soon."

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Loki frowned at the question.

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He really did not know what he could order – admittedly, there were a lot of things in his mind he would have liked to order right now, but he was in no position to demand anything over the top.

"You are the one responsible for the technical part of our collaboration, I only provide the magic.", the god answered, then took a look at their list. Most things listed did not sound familiar to him, technical terms of tools and materials he did not know.

"I guess it is obvious that we need a device to extract the Tesseract's energy. No matter what kind of weapon we are going to build, the cube as direct power source is too unstable - and too valuable to be used during a battle where it could be easily stolen."

Now it was Stark's turn to frown.

"You want me to build some batteries? Really?", the engineer asked, not caring to hide how displeased he was about that suggestion.

He had surely expected something more spectacular for his great revenge, but Loki was that Stark would understand that it was not wise to use the Tesseract in direct combat. If the cube got lost, they were left with nothing and everything they had been through so far - everything Loki had gone through, would have been in vain.

"Even in smaller scales, the Tesseract's energy is far beyond everything you could manage to gain through other resources."

Stark did not respond immediately, but stared absent-mindedly on the paper in front of him, fiddling with the pencil, sometimes putting the tip of it into his mouth to bite on the colorful plastic.

It unnerved Loki, yet the god did not comment the action.

No matter how little he liked to admit it, he needed Stark in a good mood (well, how good it could get in their current situation) and needed him to be productive.

Additionally, he knew the necessity of pencil-chewing if one was deep in thought.

Maybe after half a minute Stark's eyes lost their glassy expression, moved and focused back on Loki.

"And what are we going to power with those batteries? A toaster?"

"I thought about missiles, we need something-"

"Like that SHIELD crap? You seriously want be to build you a nuclear weapon? Sorry pal, this isn't going to happen, those things end up in the wrong hands much too fast."

There was a short moment of silence in which the two men were staring at each other, trying to read the other's face. Then, slowly, Stark's expression changed from a skeptical glare to something different, displaying disbelief and annoyance.

"Shit - actually you have no idea what to do with that cube, right?! Know what? You get away and let me handle this, I can't deal with you right now. Seriously...

Loki bit his lip, trying to hold back an insult for the human.

The mortal was right, he did not have an actual idea what kind of weapon they could power with the Tesseract's energy.

Well, he had one certain idea, but it was not the right time to tell Stark - not yet.

But maybe...
"Stark..."

"No, just get away from me for a few minutes, will ya? I need to think."

The god did not object any further, although it was kind of hurting his pride. Instead, he obeyed the human with a skeptically raised eyebrow and left him in solitude.

He walked across the great hall to a corner where he found a couple of mattresses, covered in dirt and white dust. Loki bowed down to the one in the corner and stroked his hands a few times over the worn surface, cleaning it as far as possible from the layers of dirt with the limited options he had. When he was done, Loki dropped onto the mattress, which was harder than he had anticipated, then pulled off his shoes and rubbed his feet that were aching from the too small garments.

From the distant position he was condemned to watch from now, it was hard to tell what Stark was doing. He had his back turned to Loki and was apparently sitting unmoved, probably lost in thoughts.

He did not feel any remorse for not having any valuable input for their little project, though. Stark was the weapon and technology expert, not him.

The god could partly understand the mortal's anger: the whole thing had been Loki's idea and to find out after everything that happened already, that there was not even a basic concept was enough reason to be furious at the responsible one.

At least Stark could not blame him for their current situation. Also, Loki was pretty sure it would only be temporary anyway.

They were at their captures mercy, but only for now.

As soon as he would regain his magic, Loki would turn the tables and oh, how he was looking forward to that moment!

Everything he needed was shelter and rest, and he would get a lot of it here. Hopefully.

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Adams' men came back punctual to the minute.

Tony was still sitting on the floor where he had been sitting when they had left and only stood up to wordlessly hand them the list.

After 60 minutes, the piece of paper was full with his handwriting which gave a quite chaotic sight where he had readjusted the amounts of something or crossed out another thing, just to write it back down again.

Without Jarvis to organize his racing thoughts, his notes were a mess most of the time.

Their leader - from what the other called him, his name was Jayson - cocked an eyebrow when he read through it and only chuckled.

"In your dreams we'll get you an high end hi-fi-system."

"It was worth the try."

They disappeared again, this time not messing their two captives around, with the promise to submit the paper to Adams and then get the necessary equipment here within the next 48 hours.

They could start working within the next 48 hours.

Meant about a week for design and theoretical questions only, then about 8 weeks to simultaneously build a suit for Adams - that Adams would never get in his filthy hands - and to realize all the wonderful possibilities the cube gave them. Adding the time Loki needed to restore
his magic and the probable occurrence of delays, they could be done here in about three months.

Tony rubbed his temples in an attempt to eliminate the slight headache. The similarities to Afghanistan really fucked him up. Only that this time, he had nothing to lose, because he had nothing to return home to.

He could not think of anyone who would shed a tear about him now, so he had to work for a memory only, of tear-dimmed eyes and a wide, relieved smile - the most beautiful thing one could imagine to see after three months of darkness.
If that was not motivation to work, he just did not know.

It was silent again in the great hall and when Tony turned around, Loki was still sitting on the mattress in the corner, watching him.

"It's all settled. All we do now is wait, which is bad enough in itself."

Tony walked towards the mattresses, regarding them with a disgusted look and then slumped down on one anyway. He had slept close to Loki for the last days, but he sure would take his mattress to the other end of the room for the night.

The mattress-thing was done when the first equipment and tools arrived.

Tony was glad to have something to do, some actual right to order those bastards around and tell them where to put everything and how they had to handle the robots and tools without hurting themselves like the idiots they were.

The room filled with more and more furniture and working material, soon half of the hall was full and all what was left was putting the pieces together, running the cables and ensuring the right lighting and a working internet access. Tony did that by himself, because when the going gets rough, he did everything by himself.
The there was simply nobody's abilities else he could trust like his own - even if he did not trust himself like he had done months before.

They had actually agreed on giving them a couch and a small fridge, which unfortunately contained nothing but water, and computers which did not look like teleported straight from the 90s. No StarkTech, though, but at least something.
With a bit of hacking he could download the files for his suit from his home-computer-system and maybe have access to Jarvis who would be a great help - but he was thinking too fast and too far forward again.

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Loki kept sitting on the mattress, preferring to let the mortal do the work on his own.
Being exhausted was one reason for his inactivity, but he also did not want to interfere with a man that had his own idea how things were supposed to work and how he liked to have them - especially when it came to human technology.
It would most likely end in another unpleasant and totally unnecessary quarrel between them if Loki put his hands on any of the devices.

No, instead he would do what would be of the greatest use for them now: Sleeping and restoring his magic.

The disgusting stench of the mattress became even more imminent as Loki laid down on it,
wiggling out of the jacket Stark had given to him hours prior and throwing it over his midsection, more for an illusion of protection, than for warmth.

Despite his body's demand for sleep, Loki did not rest very long, nor was his slumber undisturbed or very deep. The god woke several times, roused by the loud noises Stark was making while pushing the machines to the desired spot, only to fall back asleep seconds later. When he woke the sixth time, however, his body refused to return into slumber and demanded for nourishment instead.

Loki shifted a little on his too hard mattress, stretched his limbs (every time he did that the wound on his stomach hurt a little less) and left his sleeping place. The god was aware of the fact that he did not look impressive right now, only dressed in plain Midgardian garments with his hair sticking into all directions, but he had reached the point where he simply stopped caring about his outer appearance long ago. There was no one here to judge his look anyway – and Stark looked almost worse.

A quick look around told him that the dirty couch close to the fridge was currently unoccupied, and Loki spotted the engineer somewhere at the other side of the room, fidgeting with some of the cables and obviously trying to connect them to the wall. He found himself involuntarily watching for a few minutes, more lost in thoughts than actually comprehending what was happening at the other side of the room, before he moved forward to the fridge. The look into the white, slightly dented machine was rather disappointing: it was mostly empty except for a few bottles of water and a package of even more mushy looking bread.

Well, it was better than nothing. With several slices of bread in one hand and a bottle of water in the other, Loki perched himself on the worn sofa, sitting tailor-style, and started eating.

He had obviously been rather uncommonly focused on the food, since did not notice Stark coming closer, until the man stood right in front of him, waiving with an impatient gesture for Loki make room on the couch. The god ignored the mortal at first, pretending not to notice, while his eyes were fixed on the quickly disappearing bread, before he eventually moved to one corner of the couch, making room for the other person.

"At least we don't have to steal our food anymore.", Loki mumbled when he had finished his bread, glancing towards the mortal beside him.

Stark did not answer at first and kept nibbling on his tasteless piece bread, until he eventually responded:

"As if you would care."

Well, it was not as if Loki had expected the human to start some kind of conversation with him, but it had been worth a try.

"I don't care, nevertheless it was pathetic."

Stark stopped eating and rose his head. It was the first time they were directly looking at each other since the moment Loki had been dying in the dirty room of some motel, but now Stark's eyes were darker and did not speak of concern as they had before. He looked severely peeved.
"Do you think this here is in any way less pathetic?", the mortal asked, his voice cold and harsh. Loki averted his gaze from the other's face, his eyes now staring at the opposite wall, green irises becoming fixed on some non-existing point in the distance.

"No."

Both men fell silent again.

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Tony chewed his ropy bread with a morose expression until he was eventually finished and was left with nothing but to stare in the huge room spreading in front of them. From the corner of his eye, he could see Loki finishing his bread as well, making it obvious how he detested the disgusting piece of food by chewing insanely long on an incredibly tiny piece of it.

The silence around them - when had it last been silent around him? - made the billionaire lose himself in thoughts for a few minutes.

Not the kind of his usual, cool, determined calculations, but just some drifting from one scene to another, all of the madness they had endured and induced during the last days running in front of his inner eye like an abstruse arthouse-movie which did not make any sense at all.

Seemingly out of nowhere, still staring into emptiness, he asked a question which had just came to his mind.

"How're your wounds?"

"Better. They're healing, at least."

"Hm.", he answered with a low grunt, chewing on his dry lips thoughtfully, before he eventually turned around to Loki and looked at him directly.

"At what rate does your magic restore? Quick estimation how long it'll take for you to be fully remade. There'll be ... physical work to be done here."

He watched Loki chew his piece of bread, his green eyes fixed on the stained mattress as if he was thinking about the question himself for the first time today. Looking at his side-face, Tony wondered what he was thinking at all for the few days they had been spending together. He had lived through quite a lot with him, yet there was still a complete stranger beside him. A stranger, who was now his comrade and on whom his life depended on.

"It's also quite convenient to have a set date to work towards to. I knew how long it would approximately take me to build the Mark I... back then. Works motivational, to have a self-chosen deadline."

They had not talked that much - at least not without yelling at each other - since they met and Tony did not fully understand his sudden wish for conversation, but now, here, in the silence and emptiness of that great room, where they were completely on their own, he realized that he needed somebody to speak his mind to.

"I can't exactly tell how long it will take for it to fully regenerate, maybe three or four weeks, if everything goes as expected and I don't have to use any of it... or get injured. The wounds are currently consuming most of my magic, but it always takes longer if the magic energy has been completely drained. At least the Chitauri lost track of me that way.", the god explained, his voice low and barely loud enough to reach past the couch they were sitting on.
The way he was almost whispering, Tony felt paranoia crawl up his spine, but he could not really imagine that there were not only cameras, but also bugs hidden in the room.

"Why does it take longer when all of it was consumed?", he asked, his sudden interest surprising himself.

"The details are hard to explain... imagine a spot in a forest. If you cut off the plants and trees there, they will regrow and soon nothing will remind you that anything was ever missing... but it will take the forest much longer to fill the gap, if you tear out every single plant by its roods and make a barren land out of it."

"Makes sense.", Tony just commented, because indeed it did make sense, on a physical level as well, despite all the metaphorical woods and trees.

They sat in silence for another while and Tony tried to think about what Loki had said, tried to think about magic and tried to think about tomorrow, when they would start working – just not thinking about how much this situation of being at his captivator's mercy fucked him up and how bad he could need a drink right now.

It had been days since his last, and his thoughts returned to their familiar pattern every time any kind of problem occurred – the first solution always was a drink.

He had to distract himself with something, anything, or anyone.

There was no way of starting any kind of constructive work or thinking right now – now, when everything was still so unreal that he was not even sure whether this was still some twisted nightmare or had really happened.

So, as if on their own volition, his lips started moving again and words found their way out of his mouth, without much meaning this time, just to fill the sudden silence which had befallen them.

„For a rich man, Adams is a fucking cheapskate. I worked on computers like those they provided us with years ago.
I mean, they at least run on Windows XP instead of Vista, but it'll severely slow us down. 'Course I can give them a little face-lift, yet it's nothing but pathetic. Saw him using my operating system in his office, two-faced bast-“

„Stark.“

Loki's voice cut through his sentence like cold steel.

„What?“

„You're babbling.“

Tony felt not offended by the statement, yet when he snapped back, he sounded like he might be.

„Yeah? So what's your idea of a fun evening then? Nice game of chess? Movienight? I'd be the first one to volunteer – if we had anything of this."

"Just enjoy the silence...for once.", Loki responded, leaning back on the couch and closing his eyes, seemingly exhausted, despite his lack of movement over the entire day.

Tony did not even try to stay silent.

"Silence sucks."

That was his true opinion, because only in silence, one could hear his own thoughts. He had lived
in silence for months now and it had nearly driven him crazy.
Silence, at least a silence like this one, meant doing nothing, meant lethargy and weariness and he
simply was not able to bear with this right now.

If this whole endeavor had had any positive impact so far, it had succeeded in forcing him to
function again - on a certain, pathetically low level. Loki crashing into his shattered life like a
bomb, the Chitauri fight, their insane flight down the highway, saving Loki from certain death,
then fleeing again, running and running and running - there had not been the time to rest.
Except for sleep, and he still feared sleep.

Tony felt like if he would ease any bit of the tension from the last days now, he would not be able
to ever get up again.

So, he kept talking, hoping he could kill enough time to eventually feel something like true
tiredness which would allow him some rest, some hours without thoughts. Just that he could not
say any of this to Loki, even though they were in the same boat and faced the same shitty fate. A
few days could not establish trust in a person you barely knew, even more so if this person had
actually once been your enemy.
That's why Tony kept his words vague when he went on.

"I had silence long enough, it's nerve-wrecking. You don't want me to talk, tell me something."

He looked over to Loki, squinting his eyes a bit, checking if he was on safe land for the next
question. He came to no real conclusion, but he wanted to know anyway.

"For example, how'd you get the Tesseract."

His voice had dropped to nothing but a murmur, keeping the cosmic cube secret already becoming
a habit, although the chance that they were intercepted was quite low.

"You know what I did before you came, I have no idea what you did, what kind of blood sticks on
your hands for that thing."

"No blood that is worth anything, if you mean that. No Aesir blood.", the god responded, eyes
closed end head lazily resting on the backrest of the couch.
Tony waited for him to continue, staring at the opposite wall, since Loki seemed rather talkative
now.

"As you might imagine, I was put to trial and sentenced to imprisonment by the Allfather himself,
once returned to Asgard. They brought me into the vaults of Asgard. It was not horrific, but
agonizingly boring. Yet, I started sensing the approach of the Chitauri and grew restless. I did not
warn the Aesir, even though I regret it in hindsight. No one would have believed me anyway, no
matter what I would have told them and how convincing my arguments would have been.
So, without anyone anticipating them, the Chitauri came, attacked the city and invaded the palace.
Several dozens of them found their way down into the vault and broke into my cell.
I killed them and took the way to the weapons chamber immediately. It was obvious they did not
come for me, but the Tesseract."

Loki paused, opened his eyes and blinked in Tony's direction, but he did not look at him, just
nodded in acknowledgment. With a low sigh, Loki continued.

"I took the Tesseract and planned to take the other artifacts with me as well, but it was too late for
that. The Chitauri had found the weapons vault, too many of them to fight against all of them on
my own, especially in the condition I way in. So I fled, teleported myself into another realm."
Another small sigh escapes Loki’s lips. Tony could imagine it was not the most pleasant days to remember for him now.

"They chased me, no matter where I teleported myself. They traced my magic, like bloodhounds trace their prey, and the only chance I had was keep running - or fight them if they got to close. I did not sleep in all this time and barely ate anything."

Another hesitation, then the god continued.

"Once I was driven close to total exhaustion, it was obvious that I could not continue like this. Further running would only result in my death and the Chitauri in the possession of the Tesseract. I came up with a new plan, which resulted in approaching you. I guess you know the rest of the story."

Once the tale was finished, Loki rearranged his position, pulled his legs closer to his chest, resting in a half-lying, half sitting position on the old couch, his head almost on the headrest. The talking had obviously exhausted him, but Tony could understand that.

"Sounds like you had a great time as well.", he answered with a bitter chuckle.

He had listened carefully, imagining Loki’s chase through the Universe and the horrors he must have felt, the exhaustion, the fear of death. Even though he refused to let any false sympathy emerge, he could not deny a feeling of respect for the god's durability.

Yet, that feeling was not new - if he did not have an ounce of respect for him, he would never have decided to come with him.

In fact, under different circumstances, Loki would have been an interesting person to get to know, much more interesting than his not-brother, who had a heart as big as Canada and was a great friend (well, had been a great friend until he disappeared), yet lacked a certain ... something Loki had. Fortunately, he would have enough time to figure out just what that certain something was - you got to know a person pretty good when imprisoned with them for several months.

The ex-billionaire's mouth contorted in another bitter grin when he thought of Yinsen and what the man would probably think when he would ever hear of the situation Tony had maneuvered himself into.

Not the right thoughts right now.

Loki’s little tale had consumed some time and a glance to the side told him, that the god would appreciate some sleep more than the continuation of their talk and strangely enough, Tony felt satisfied with the answer he had got for once, satisfied enough to leave Loki be.

"They won't come back today.", he said into the silence, just to have his thoughts confirmed.

"I do not think so."

"Hip, hip, hooray.", Tony stated dryly, then pushed himself upwards from the couch to walk over to one of the mattresses, grabbing an empty sheet of paper and a pencil to take with him. For a second, he looked around in the huge room, then he found what he was looking for.

After walking half a mile to the other end of the room, he found the light-switch to turn of the blinding neon-lights on the ceiling, leaving the hall in darkness, except for some smaller light on one of the work surfaces.

In this dim light, all the machinery drew grotesque shadows on the opposite walls, forms like gigantic dinosaurs and insect-like monsters, but it felt more cozy than the revealing light from
before. He let himself fall on the way-too-soft material of his mattress (another night with back-
pain laying ahead of him - awesome) and leaned against the wall, paper on his knees.
He did not feel like he would come up with any mind-blowing ideas today, but he needed
something to occupy himself with.

Once you became familiar with Insomnia, you could learn to see through her tricks and patterns
and one of them was: sleep would not come when you wanted him. Sleep only came as an assault,
bringing you down in sudden microsleep while you were busy doing something important.

So, he would do something important now.

It took half an hour before his eyes fell shut and his head down on his chest the first time.
Cooperation

Despite everything that had gone wrong these past days, weeks, even months, there was one good development:
Every time Loki woke up, he felt a little stronger, the wound in his abdomen a little less tensed, his magic not as drained as the day before.

Upon waking, Loki felt that more than just a nights sleep had passed, the busy sound of machines moving and humming, and the noise of nimble fingers tipping on an old and yellowed keyboard filled the background, making falling back asleep an impossibility.
The god turned around on the couch, attempting to find a little more rest nevertheless, before a rather nasty, metallic screeching forced his eyes open, demanding his immediate attention.

"What in the Nine Realms are you doing over there?", Loki asked a little sourly in the direction the sound had come from, where he noticed Stark fiddling with some of the rather large and plain-looking cables.

"I'm moving the fridge, I need this cables here and it's in the way. Now get your ass over here and help me shoving this thing, it weighs half a ton.", the billionaire complained from his crouched position on the ground, already slightly panting from exhaustion. He was so totally absorbed in his work with the cables, that he did not even spare the god a glance.

Loki raised his brows, but then merely shook his head in disbelief at the human's choice of words. Yet, he left the couch and walked over to the fridge.
The faster they worked, the sooner they could end this whole tiresome affair, and he was not the one to complain if Stark finally started to do what he had been chosen for.
Without waiting for further instructions, Loki placed his hands on the side of the fridge - an ugly old thing in a pale, faded out green, yet the worst thing was the smell of it - and shoved it to make space for the cables.
The sound was as unpleasant as expected, but fortunately only lasted for a second, then the room was filled with silence again, except for the continuous buzz of machinery and the hiss of the flame-spitting welder in Stark's hand.
For a firm moment, Loki found himself mesmerized by the bright blue flame, staring into it with wide eyes.
It was quiet hard to tell if Stark still suffered from alcohol-withdrawal, the steady movements of his hands did not divulge anything, and the sweat on his forehead could have also come from the heat.

"What exactly are you doing there?"

Stark stopped in his movements to look at Loki, taking a second to catch his breath apparently for the first time this morning, a hint of annoyance in his voice when he answered.

"I am trying to work here, but our oh-so-generous host is making it quite difficult for me."

With a movement of his thumb, he turned off the welding equipment. Loki's eyes followed him as he turned around again to walk to another destination, stepping carefully over some of the thick cables he had removed from their former positions to a more centered and better-lit place.
Stark's gaze ran searchingly over one of the cables, until he found what he as looking for and crouched down beside of it, turning on the welding equipment again. He grimaced – maybe out of pain, or maybe because of the rather nasty rip in the wire - then continued his work.
Loki came closer, watching the scene in front of him with his arms crossed on front of his chest,
face questioning, but patient. At the moment, there was not much to do for him.

"The wires are shit. Well, they could have been just old and bad quality, but they have been treated like shit - see that crack there? Happens when you bend them too hard."

Stark halted, ran his finger along the wire until he found the next breakage and started again, face sore.

"I don't know how he hires his men - probably in the zoo, because only an ape can be that stupid to deliver my equipment in such a condition. I don't know what he wants us to do, because I have the faint feeling that this is merely the tip of the Iceberg and that some of the stuff will explode in our face one day or another."

The mortal got up on his feet again, wiping sweat from his forehead and forcing the strands of hair to get back where they belonged.

"We have to fix the cables before there is anything we can work with. I would go so far to say that we have to check on all the apparatus, just to be on the safe side. Well, I check, since everything your trained eyes can detect is fairy dust and troll traces.", Stark said grumpily, turning back to where he had left off.

Loki felt himself at a loss of what to say, he was unused to this kind of situation, a situation in which he was totally useless, while the respectively other person did all the work and it urged the god to do something on his own, but that was out of question.

His magic was still in a state of regeneration, the greatest amount of it was already used up through his wounds and anyway, summoning the Tesseract before having the most essential machines ready for use, was nothing but a unnecessary, avoidable risk.

And asking Stark to explain his work to him... out of question.

Yes, Loki was an intelligent being and learned quicker than every other Asgardian, having the rare skill of understanding and adapting to new things almost instantly - but he also knew Stark's mind was capable of similar things – well, for a human - and even he had needed more than half of a human lifetime to gain his current knowledge and skill. Although it would not need that long for Loki to reach this amount of knowledge, it was time they did not have at the moment - not to mention the fact that Stark would not be pleased (that was a mild way to put it) if Loki disturbed him in his work, demanding lessons in physics, math and engineering.

No, he better let the mortal be. Once Stark was finally working and apparently occupied enough to stop being a lethargic wreck, he better did not intervene.

Throwing a last glance at the mortal, Loki asked:

"Do you need my help for anything?"

The human merely hummed in response and shook his head, shoved the old goggles back over his eyes and continued the work on the half torn copper-cable.

The god deduced that it was the best moment to leave, now, yet he would not do so without taking the last piece of bread from the fridge. He frowned at the mushy look of the food, which caused undeniably some disgust at the thought that it would end up in his mouth in a matter of seconds.

Yet it was also an undeniable fact that he was hungry, extremely hungry, since his body - once his intestines had grown back together as they were supposed to - remembered that he had hardly eaten
at all through the past months. Even if he did not like it - sustaining an entire, malnourished body as well as creating magic needed an amount of energy that was not to be underestimated.

Loki ate the bread while trying to ignore the taste by swallowing as quickly as possible. At least Stark had not noticed he had taken their last bit of food, but the human did not seem to feel much hunger anyway.

Two days passed, two days in which Stark repaired the cables, checked each of the machines and adjusted them according to his ideas.

Two days in which they did not speak more than the necessary words to each other, which, all in all, came up six sentences that consisted each of less than four words. Mostly, they concerned either food or something Loki had to help Stark with or a nicely uttered “Get your ass out of the way!”

Two days in which Loki felt more and more useless with every passing second he sat on the couch or his mattress, watching Stark working from the distance.

Despite the rather cool temperatures inside the hall, the clothing stuck to Loki’s skin, dampened through the last aftermaths of fever his body was driving out. He was desperate for some water, more than the few bottles their captors had brought along with (fortunately) an amount of food that could nourish two full grown men for longer than a few days.

Showers as well as sinks were barely working, not producing more than a few splashes of rotten water, accompanied by a nauseating stench, so Loki preferable kept far away from them. They might finally have the tools to work with, but their generally bad conditions made Loki (and he knew Stark as well, although the mortal did not talk about it) wish back for a hotel room with an actual bed and running water.

Yet, the halfway-intact mirror was the main reason why he avoided the bathroom, for he knew that he would not like what he would see in the reflecting surface.

However, the sheer knowledge that there was a mirror, something he had not allowed himself to look at, made the whole thing totally magnetic. A treacherous part of his mind always urged him to break restrictions, even his own.

So, on this third day of their imprisonment in the fabric hall, the curiosity was too strong, and instead of passing the mirror as he had it the previous days, Loki stopped in front of it, finally daring to look at himself for the first time after months.

The god was not sure what he had expected, maybe a skeleton-like face with sticky black hair and a thin, sinewy neck - at least that was the way he felt like. Yet, when he looked at himself, his face differed not that much from the last time he had looked at himself. His skin maybe was a bit paler and the violet and blue color around his eyes more vibrant, the cheeks hollowed, but except for that, everything was unchanged.

Well, not everything.

Hesitantly, Loki reached up to his hair, pushing his fingers into the long, slightly curled strands, a futile attempt to straighten it as he had done it his entire life.
It was not that he did not like the look of it, but it was a feature he had always believed to have inherited from his mother. It was just one of the many things that had pushed him a little further towards the female part of the family, away from Thor and Odin, and away from the warrior he had had to be.

No one had ever said it out loud, maybe no one except him had even noticed the resemblance, however it had already disturbed Loki back when he had been a child. The whole drama had ended with himself smearing a lot oil into his hair to keep it straight, until he eventually developed a spell for that. Which, all in all, had never served exactly the purpose to appear more masculine.

However, as had many other things, it had lost its importance to him, the stroking movements through his hair were merely an old habit, before he let it be and focused on things of more urgent importance.

His right hand - formerly occupied with the hair - lifted his hoodie and the black shirt, revealing the wound beneath.

It looked surprisingly... good. The red color around the edges had disappeared and the skin had healed, knitted itself back together. Nothing but a vanishing scar reminded of the life-threatening wound.

Everything looked fine, even better than expected except for the still reddened spots where the threads vanished under his skin. It was time to get them out.

Back in the main room, Loki passed Stark, who was sitting on the computer (he was working there for hours now, but the god had no idea what he was actually trying to achieve) and sat down on the mattress at the other end of the room.

This time he removed the hoodie and shirt entirely, since he needed both hands for what he was about to do and would preferably not be disturbed by any skidding clothes.

Admittedly, Loki never had had stitches in his life. Healing spells, shape-shifting and potions had always taken care of his wounds, so he found himself a bit at a lack of what to do. Especially, for he had no sharp tool (the captors had made sure to give them no knives) to cut the threads. It was a difficult question how to get them out properly, but in the end he decided for the most obvious solution, fixing one of the strands between thumb and index finger, pulling and twisting it.

The only result was a stab of unpleasant pain within the wound and an angry hiss escaping his clenched teeth.

The god removed his hands, the motion accompanied by a frustrated snarl, before he caught the thread anew between his fingers, this time using both hands, trying to break the stubborn strand. Of course it did not work, and the repeated failure made him spat an ugly course.

"What the hell are you doing over there?", echoed Stark's voice through the hall, as well as the noise of a chair scrapping over concrete ground. The mortal appeared in Loki's field of vision, previously blocked through the surrounding machines, an annoyed frown playing across his features.

"Removing the stitches.", Loki answered monosyllabic and, similar to Stark, made no attempt to hide his annoyance about the unpleasant interruption.

"Okay, but can you do that without making so much noise? What is your problem?"
"I don't have a knife to cut the threads."

That answer, to Loki's utter surprise, did not result in another insult from Stark's side, but caused him to chuckle.
The human actually chuckled.

"Seriously, you want me to work with you? You can't even cut a few damn threads. Don't move. Geez, this is almost painful to look at."
With those words, Stark rose from the chair, taking a small object from the desk with him.

"Is that a piece of metal?"
Loki did not even try to hide his mistrust as he caught sight of the slightly uneven and rusty, yet sharp shard of iron, once Stark came into proximity.

"Better than using your hands. Now lean back and don't move, you don't want me to cut you, hm?"

Loki followed the demand, not commenting it, and leaned back, while Stark pushed the metal shard under the first threat with a precision only a doctor or a mechanic should possess and with a small, snapping noise, the thread was cut, this time causing only a small stinging sensation in the wound, then the remaining strand was pulled out.
The process was continued with the twelve other stitches, the silence only interrupted by the noise of the ripping thread and the hum of the old computer in the background, both of them not uttering a word.

Loki's head rested on the mattress, eyes fixed on the gray ceiling, wondering what had driven the human to actually help him.
Maybe, after saving his life from the lethal infection, Stark felt responsible that the wound healed properly.
Maybe, which was more likely, he simply wanted the god to shut up.

It did not matter in the end, but what mattered was the fact that the strands were finally gone from the wound. Once Stark's hands were removed, Loki slid his own fingers across the plain scar, pressing tentatively against it.
Everything seemed alright, the healing process almost finished.

"Thank you."

"Yeah, sure, sure. And now shut up, okay?"

With that the human got up again, heading back to the computer without sparing the god another glance.

Loki found himself staring at the spot were Stark had vanished back behind the machines longer than he actually wanted to, before he tore himself out of his trance and put the clothing back on.
He truly was in Stark's debt.

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The fourth day had just begun and they were finally in a state where something like 'work' was actually possible.

All systems were running smoothly and the continuous short-circuit caused when he dared to make more than 2 computers operating at once was officially eliminated. Tony had even allowed himself to tinker a bit with the dusty interior of one of them, increasing efficiency by approximately 27%
merely by exchanging some minimal parts of it.
It was nothing worth calling a success, but it was helping to get into the flow again and he really,
really needed that.

He would never tell Loki and he hoped that he had not noticed it yet (he was making sure to be
fully concentrated when he noticed the god watching him), but he could feel the impact of having
worked on nothing real for months - and nothing which he had done without having at least two
glasses of insert-some-kind-of-random-booze-here knocked down.
Rarely, but undeniably, he had minutes where his hands lacked full control and slipped, sometimes
he noticed a slight, barely present tremor which made him incredibly angry. Still, he could do
nothing about it than working against it.

What was really quite annoying where his problems to stay focused, concentrated for long hours.
He knew that Loki had noticed at least that, but the god kept his trap shut and Tony acted all
indifferent about it, so it just went on to the list of things which severely sucked, but nobody spoke
of openly.

By forcing himself to work until he could barely keep himself on his two feet, he prohibited his
thoughts from the endless circulating around always the same things. He knew that that was
probably just another way of self-deception, but he generously counted the fact that he functioned
almost normally as a step in the right direction.
Wherever that right direction was.

When they had their first real visit from their captivators, it was morning – at least the clock on the
wall said 9:47, but being trapped in this windowless, underground room that could be a lie as well
– and Tony was in their bathroom.

„We have a visitor.“

Loki's voice was smooth, almost bored when he announced Jayson's arrival, clearly showing that
he did not fear the man.

Drying his face with one of the old towels, Tony stepped out of the small wet room. His beard had
grown again, since he had not been allowed to shave in here (no sharp objects) and he felt like he
did not look much better than when Loki had found him in his mansion.
Also, it was morning and the night had been short, so there was that.

Nevertheless, his lips faked a thin smile and he stepped right in front of that hunk of a man,
throwing the towel at one of the desks.

„Morning, sunshine.“

Jayson did not let himself be provoked, merely gave him pitying grin, as if he was congratulating
him for his trying, even though it was in vain.

He did not say a word when he pushed Tony aside, walking over to the working area. Obviously,
he was here to check on them and even before he had finished his round through the small
workshop and had come back to him, Tony knew this was not one of the good mornings.
„I came here to see results, Stark. I don't see anything."

Jayson was towering in front of him, his muscled arms crossed in front of his chest. He gave an
impressive view, but the inventor was not unfamiliar with having to look up to people bigger than
him.
It had stopped to stress him years ago, now it was merely unnerving.
I thought I'd have to fill out one of these little brochures, reporting on how satisfied I was with the service provided, but I'm more than glad to give my complaint in vocal form: Your machines are shit.

He could hear Loki shifting behind him, stepping closer to the conversation without arousing too much interest from Jayson. Even though Tony did not expect the situation to escalate (Adams was far too keen to humiliate him here a little longer), it was a good feeling to have somebody in his back who would – hopefully – intervene when things became hairy.

"You think you're in the position to complain?"

"Yeah, actually I am. Do you pick your cables from trash? Because I had to fix every single one of them. Same with the hardware – if you want results, give me something to work with."

"Story goes around you build your first suit from scraps over there – unable to perform that miracle any longer?"

The only reaction betraying that Tony would rather have not been reminded of that cave was how his facial expression hardened, eager to show no sign of weakness. He did not even know how much Loki knew of his past (surely he had read his files before his first attack on earth), but he could live without another constant reminder of terrible things, thanks a lot.

"If you are trying to say regarding technology you're on the same level as some Afghan hillbillies, than you're about ri-"

"You shut your fucking mouth and go to work!"

Jayson's yell echoed through the huge room when he cut Tony's sentence short, stepping forward and unfolding his arms in one abrupt movement, the threat of attack suddenly immanent. Yet, it did not happen and Tony managed to step only one step back, now looking to the side, avoiding eye contact and through that hopefully another outburst.

In the corner of his eye he could see Loki, whose fists slowly relaxed again when he became aware that there would be nothing happen other than harsh voices and a few insults. Which came, quite a lot actually, a perfect demonstration of power and disrespect, ending with the thug shoving him backwards just like High School, just that Tony had never been to High School, had never been pushed around and had his ribs broken only a bit more than a week prior.

He inhaled sharply at Jayson's well-aimed hit, clasping his rib cage on one side, but still meeting the other's gaze when he delivered his final message.

"We will come visit you in a week. Better have something done by then – and learn to keep your big mouth shut, Stark, or you and your little sidekick won't have it that cozy in here any longer."

With that, he turned, not without sparing Loki a long, distrustful glance, leaving them alone. A small wink of his and two other nameless footmen of Adam's came in, carrying a sixpack of water bottles and a plastic bag, probably filled with another delicious ration of old bread. If they were lucky, some day or the other, their captivator would send them the rest of his food – surely salmon-heads had more nutrients than white bread.

"Fucking shithead.", Tony spat, retreating to one of the desks to lean against it, pushing his shirt up for a quick, prophylactic look at his ribs. There was nothing wrong, of course there wasn't, but it hurt like hell.
"They're impatient."

Loki's appearance at his side was not what he wanted at all, even though the god's voice sounded more sympathetic than mocking for his ears. Nevertheless, he turned away from him, walking over to the sixpack to take out one of the bottles.

"They're stupid and arrogant. Of course they know there's nothing we could have done until now, they just like to rub my face in it. Must be fun being the sidekick, watching me taking the blows for an arrangement you advocated."

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"Admittedly, it is a nice change of ways that for once I'm not the one blamed and beaten up for something.\textquotedblright., Loki admitted, almost honestly, earning himself an angry huff from the injured mortal.

Loki just ignored it, he did not care very much if Stark was angry at him, he was not here to make friends.

The only thing that had to be taken care of was that Stark kept functioning and working. Right now, however, he did not look much as if he was able to do even the most basic things of this two requirement, judging the way he leaned against the work-desk, clutching his chest in obvious pain.

"You are lucky that he didn't hit the side with the broken rib... does it hurt much?"

"I'm fine, everything's awesome.\textquotedblright., he earned as sarcastic remark from the mortal, who was already rearranging his shirt and turning away, carrying himself back to the computer.

Loki followed close behind, taking a closer look at the glass screen, only to be confronted with a bunch of numbers and letters that did not make the least sense to him.

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm creating a connection to the backup-server of Jarvis in my house, I need the blueprints and calculations for the suit, there is no way I'm going to build one from scratch, not with that little time we have."

Stark hesitated a moment, wetting his lips before he continued speaking, eyes still locked on the screen.

"How long until you have access to the Tesseract?"

Loki took some time with the answer, carefully calculating his words, while twirling the water bottle in his hand, back and forth, back and forth...

"Basically, I already have enough magic to retrieve it from the dimensional fold, but for safety measures I'm going to wait another week, maybe two. I won't take risks with such a delicate issue: there isn't only magic required to summon it, I need magic to conceal it from the cameras as well as direct visitors and enough strength to protect it, should something turn out not as we had planned it - which might happen every second."

Stark looked thoughtful when he considered Loki's concerns, yet not angry. As a smart man he probably understood his motives too well.

"Alright, if we say two weeks - just to be on the safe side - there would one day for rebooting Jarvis and downloading the blue prints, nine days to measure and build the first parts of the suit, four days-"
"You are going to build the suit?"

"What do you mean, the suit?", Stark asked, this time a bit angry for having been interrupted in his train of thoughts.

"Of course I'm going to build a suit, since you came up with anything better than weapons we already used. Once 're addressing the theme, any new ideas regarding weapons yet? Or do you still want some missiles that blow up more of my own planet than these gray ugly motherfuckers?"

Yes, Loki had thought about it and was well aware what was required to enable the use of the Tesseract to him. He doubted that Stark would like the idea.

"Yes. I need something to transfer the energy of the cube into my body, to make use of it as magic."

There was it, the deep frown digging into Stark's features while the men stared absent-mindedly onto the screen. Then he blinked and turned his head; finally looking at Loki.

"You know that I'm no biologist..."

"You don't need to be one. I merely need a device that is able to draw energy from the Tesseract and channel it. That is the whole problem, the reason why I can't use it. I can feel its energy right beneath the surface, yet it is impenetrable for me."

"I will see what I can do. At least you have a plan now - but there are no promises that any of this is going to work."

"I'm well aware of this. So it is set? I'm going to retrieve the cube within fourteen days?"

Stark nodded approvingly, yet his attention had shifted back to the screen, the pain in his chest apparently long forgotten.

Despite having achieved nothing, Loki felt oddly pleased with the development: Finally, there was an idea what to do and a plan establishing in front of them, so that they could move on with their almost impossible quest.

Loki went to his mattress and back to sleep soon after his talk with Stark. When he awoke again, he found the entire hall clad in deep darkness, barely illuminated though a few lights on the work-desks.

It was an uncommon sight for Loki and he remained silent for a few seconds, watching his surroundings. In all these days down in the hall he had never witnessed Stark sleeping, the human was always awake when Loki went to rest and he was awake when Loki left the bed. Yet as it seemed he had caught a rather uncommon time to wake, which would luckily provide him with some hours in utter peace, without the mortal's noises disturbing him.

Quietly getting up from the mattress, Loki stalked through the room to investigate the interior of the fridge, his subconsciousness hoping to find anything else than bread within, but of course there was nothing other to be found than their usual prison food (it would be self-deceit to call it anything else) and Loki closed the green box again, now at a lack of what to do.

It was just then that the god caught a noise from the other end of the room, the corner Stark was
sleeping in, quiet, yet not to miss for the god's sensible ears.
He chose to ignore it at first, telling himself that it was none of his business whatever Stark might be doing there, but the noise did not cease, so, driven by curiosity as well as something akin to worry, the god went to take a closer look at the human

The mortal was squirming in his sheets, head tossing from left to right, yet he was still obviously asleep. His lips left an incoherent muttering, indefinable noises and his brows were knitted in an expression of utter distress.
He was having a nightmare, that was easy to assume, but the god was not sure what to do about it.

Yet, when a muffled whimper escaped Stark, Loki had enough.
He needed the inventor rested and ready for work the next morning, at least that was what he told himself while kneeling down beside the sleeping frame to wake the other man. Everything else would have been useless sentiment.

"Wake up!"

Grasping one of the human's shoulders, Loki shook Stark, carefully at first, but when he didn't wake, with more force.

Brown terrified eyes opened abruptly, then Stark rose with a gasp, staring at Loki with wide eyes.

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As racing shadows, distant screams and the hot feeling of panic slowly ceased, it needed his eyesight a few seconds to adjust so that the blurred silhouette in front of him could be identified as Loki and the room around him as real, three-dimensional and material.

A moment too long his stare remained on the god's face with an expression of disorientation, his sweaty palms still clawing into the thin fabric of the duvet, breath going erratically in the same way as his pulse rushed in his ears.
With a rapid movement, he tore the blanket to the side to get up as quick as he could, scrambling to his feet, away from Loki, movements still uncoordinated and shaky.

"Stark."

Loki's voice was cool as always, but determined, almost demanding, yet Tony did not listen, just headed towards the bathroom like attracted by an invisible, violent force. The tap opened, a splash of cold water right in his face, then another one, and another one, until the cold sweat was gone and he was dripping wet.

He closed the valve again, remaining motionless for a few seconds, hands resting upon the washbowl, head hanging between his shoulders, before he eventually left the small room.
The formerly tensed, hectic movements had severely slowed down as a leaden fatigue got hold of him again, and still without not as much as a look at Loki, he slumped down on one of the chairs with a world-weary sigh, bending forward and burying his face in his hands.
Yet, he was not granted much more than a minute to come around again, to handle the turmoil inside.

Slinking out of the darkness without making a sound, Loki stepped at his side, leaning against one of the working desks, his arms crossed and his gaze lingering on Tony's bent form. It was a matter of seconds until he would say something and Tony felt like he did not have the ability to give a proper reaction.
"You still have nightmares."

The sentence was nothing more than stating the obvious and if it should serve to warm up for a conversation, it failed its purpose. Tony remained silent, pressing his eyes together until he saw stars.

"Do they still hunt you every night or did I have the luck to witness a rare occurrence?"

"Usually you tend to miss them.", Tony finally gave an answer, yet his face stayed hidden behind his hands, his voice a barely comprehensible mumble against his palms.
"It's better you miss them.", he added, a definite, bitter note in the words.

He was already building a wall again, determined to keep Loki far away from him and don't give him access. He could just have gone back to bed, pretending to sleep, but the god would have easily seen through that - no way he could lay himself to sleep in the next hour.

"Is it about your woman?"

When Loki mentioned Pepper, Tony's whole body tensed visibly.

Then, slowly, he lowered his hands and sat up again to lean against the back rest, looking at Loki with a hardened expression, eyes glistening from unsaid words and unsolved misery. It was impossible to tell whether there was real interest or even sympathy in Loki's face, the half-darkness around them kept that secret. It would have made no difference, for he was not prepared for that kind of talk no matter what.

"What do you think, Freud?!"

His sarcastic hiss was failing its aim as Loki was oblivious to the implied insult and seemingly undisturbed by the harsh tone. Tony felt more awake than he should be, the bitterness stored up inside for days now dripping from each word.

He had been working whole days without caring much about what went on inside himself, projecting the anger at the work lying ahead of them.

Now, in the surreal and utter blackness of the cellar room, he could no longer deny that planning, working, functioning meant not a single fuck to the fact that up there, he was still a wreck.

"I'm in your debt. You aided me with the wound twice, I might... be of help now."

Tony frowned at that, doubtful if he had heard right, then he chuckled dryly and shook his head, heaving himself from the chair to go somewhere else.

"You cannot help me."

He heard Loki's steps, following him along his path which still had no real destination.

"I have no need of you when you are a whimpering, insomniac wreck."

Tony stopped abruptly again, turning around to face Loki. He would make this clear just once, so that there would be no further cases of this superficial pity which was surely nothing more than disguised mockery.

When he talked, it was way too much information and way too personal, but he just needed Loki to shut up and leave him alone.

"Listen, pal. Whatever I build to avenge her, whatever alien asses I blow up in her name, she will remain dead. The most I can hope for is for the nightmares to stop, but even that will change nothing of the fact that she's dead and it's my fault. Now tell me how you want to kiss it better and be of any help with that."
"Yes, there are some things that can not be undone... and still you are here in this room, with me, making yourself all that effort. You saved my life, and that is a debt I'm not sure I can repay, but despite what you might think of me, I'm a person of honor and intend to give something in return."

At the last sentence, Tony rose his head and their eyes met, green staring into brown with an intensity they had not known before.

Only now, looking at the god like that, he slowly became aware of what he had already done for Loki, things that had come so naturally to him that he had not even thought of them a big deal. It was not only that the had saved Loki's life back in the hotel room, simply the fact that he had decided to accompany the god in his quest for revenge, leaving everything he had left behind for him, seemed to unfold it's true meaning.

Until now, he had not really thought about just how deep he was already bound to Loki, how every little decision of the past weeks had one by one cemented his path and made turning back impossible.

From that moment when he had decided to leave his hospital bed and go with the god, he had known that there would be a lot more to give, more to sacrifice for their matter, but it had not stopped him from going anyway.

It was peculiar that he had not thought about it until now, but when he was searching for a hint of remorse in his soul, the feeling of regret for all the wrongs he had done, he could not find any. Without much hesitation he had burned down all the bridges behind him (or so he thought at least): he had taken down a helicopter full of SHIELD soldiers, he had fought Steve, he had saved Loki's life numerous times, he had vanished from the map.

Still, the only thing which hunted him to the point where it gave him nightmares was the wild fear that all of this would not be enough.

It could not be enough - but if he would accept that fully, he would have to face the fact that he had left all of what had been his life for nothing but the mad ramblings of a psychotic ex-god.

His eyes still locked to the intensively black abyss of Loki's blown pupils, his mouth twitched into a dark, cynical smile, but it was gone a second later.

„The end justifies the means, right? Better make that end worthwhile.“

Yes, Loki was right.

He had to be right, because otherwise Tony was even more pathetic than he thought of himself and he was not sure whether he would survive that realization after all.

He broke their eye-contact, staring into the darkness for a second, then he looked up again. This time, the grin established itself fully as grim determination settled itself within his mind.

„So, you owe me big time. Gonna make you return that favor sooner or later. I count on your royal word of honor."

It was the first time he saw Loki return his grin, not with any movement in his face, but with a sudden, bright glistening in his eyes and a small, slightly ironical nod.

The horrors of his night's sleep had faded into the darker corners of his mind already and Tony felt a calmness inside of his chest he had not felt a long time. He did not feel good, far from it, but there was a certain way through which fatalism tended to set things right and gave thoughts a whole new order.

Somewhere inside of him he could hear something shatter, that small part of him which had still clung to a past, or an alternative of the direction he had taken.
A part which now finally died completely. Whether he had killed it himself or it just followed some natural order of things he was not sure. He decided to generously ignore it, telling himself that no matter which alternative this would have been, this was the only one of which he had control.

„How about we gather some ideas for that machine of yours? Night's still young.“

When they were sitting on the cold stone floor together within an illuminated circle of light from one of the desk lights, hunched over prints of the data SHIELD had collected of the Tesseract before Loki's last arrival on earth, something was different from before. Tony did not concentrate on what it was exactly, but for the first time he felt like he was actually working with Loki instead just tolerating his presence as a necessary evil.
Fellowship

They went to bed again at about 7 AM, something which would have not occurred if he had been provided with a decent coffee machine. He would have to insist on that, otherwise work would be quite difficult.

Sustaining a high-functioning mind like his, his body could not run on water and yesterday's bread alone. With the new rush of motivation, his physique demanded for nourishment and Tony remembered that he had not felt any kind of appetite, except the one for booze, since what felt like ages.

He had not thought about Pepper again.
To be precise, he had not thought about anything else than what was lying in front of them, shoving any interrupting images aside.

Concentrated on the problem at hand, he had felt a vague reminiscence of the mania with which he had used to throw himself in new projects and seemingly, Loki sensed his changed attitude as well. His input was unexpectedly visionary and he abstained from any unnecessary comment, just sat there with him on the floor, hunched over scribbles and more detailed drawings and in the end, something worth calling 'a first design idea'.

Yet it was exactly that: a mere idea, impossible to realize without the necessary calculations. For which he needed the necessary data, data he could not simply ask Adams about.

Time to call in the one person on earth he trusted more than himself.

“Jarvis, you there?”

Silence from the computer screen. The blinking line where actually words should appear was frustrating him to no end, but then again: it was only the eighth trial in 20 minutes, so no reason to freak out just now, not at all.

At the moment, it was 10:49 AM and the inventor sat in front of one of the computers – the one he had given the make-over – trying to connect to his A.I. without whirling up too much digital dust that anybody would be able to locate his whereabouts or his intentions.

It was tricky.

Typing in high-speed and making what sounded like a hell lot of noise with the old keyboard he was forced to use, he tried a different route, changing the necessary digits in the code and almost broke the Enter-key when he smashed it the ninth time with his index finger.

No answer again.

“Stubborn bastard!”

He had not showered for three days and, after those nervous hours of sleep in which he had been endlessly twisting and turning on his mattress, he probably looked frightening (the mirror was his daily reminder that he was more and more returning to the hobo-look again).

Yet, thankfully, his artificial intelligence was not intelligent enough to judge that if not connected to cameras, so he had nobody's comments to fear so far, since Jarvis was still doing that “every A.I. is an island”-thing and refused to answer.

Loki was still asleep, or pretending to, lying in his mattress on the other end of the room with his back facing towards the engineer.
Tony rubbed his beard thoughtfully, then tried another way, eyes running over the endless lines of numbers and letters on the screen which reminded more of an unknown, ancient language than coherent English, still, the genius could read both just fine.

Another smash on the Enter-key, another time nothing happened. Tony typed some really mean cuss words, then hammered on 'Enter' again, pushing himself away from the desk with his feet, the chair rolling a few feet backwards.

He was just about to actually tear out some strands of his own hair, when suddenly, words formed on the screen under his litany of vulgarity.

With a grin on his face, Tony took his hands out of his hair and rolled towards the desk again. Even in written form, he could practically hear the British accent.

“I refuse to even assume I earn these kind of names, since I have been waiting patiently for your call for several days now.”

“I'm so sorry. It's not you, it's me, I already told you. I really thought we were over this state.”

It was good to joke around a bit. He allowed himself that kind of joking for a few seconds, since Loki was still not around and the hall was filled by a pleasant silence, giving the illusion of privacy.

“I think it is safe to assume that it is not me who is standing in the way of our both progress.”

Tony smiled faintly, shaking his head when he typed the answer, one half of his attention already busy with finding the connection to the speakers.

“Straight to the point as always. I need your help, Jarvis. Give me a second and I will get you your voice.”

With a bit of crouching around, hunched over cables and wires, he installed the connection with speakers and microphone, than he got up again, ran his hand through his hair and looked expectantly at the speakers.

“You still there, Jarvis?”

“At your service, Sir.”

The computer voice was much less impressive, coming from such small speakers, yet it was sufficient for their purpose and could be heard through the entire hall – if you were really quiet.

"Who are you talking to?, asked Loki, who had approached Tony from behind, peaking over his shoulder.

Seemingly, the look on the screen did not answer the question.

"Is it Jarvis?"

"Indeed.", Jarvis answered, it's voice not as impressive as always, filtered by the crackling noises of the speakers, yet still unmistakeable.

"You still haven't explained to me who he actually is."

Tony turned around, a hint of his former pride playing across his otherwise haggard face, a small smile forcing its way on his lips. How easily one responded to the tiniest spark of joy, after months of misery.
Yet, Loki’s interest seemed real and somehow tickled his vanity.

"Jarvis is an artificial intelligence I created a couple of years ago. He runs my machines, keep track of my appointments... and of, yeah, pretty much of everything."

"Not to mention reminding you of eating and sleeping, Sir.", Jarvis added cockily, charming a chuckle out of Loki.

After working for hours at night and finally achieving something, the previous tension between the two of them had eased a bit; at least they were not that close to jumping at each others throat anymore.

"Jarvis, please get me the coded blueprints of the mark VII, as well as the files about Hydra weapons from my home server and print them for me."

"Very well Sir, the transfer will require 24 minutes and 37 seconds."

"Geez, which form of transfer do you use? Snail mail?", Tony kvetched, rolling his eyes.

Yet, his complaining was only half-hearted and he decided to use the time for some breakfast, an idea which was quickly adapted by Loki. It was not even worth being called breakfast, but the bread was still enough of an inducement to bring them both at one table.

They both ate in silence, almost a pleasurable one, the only sounds the howling of the computer’s ventilation system which seemed to explode any second from the effort it had to put up for the transfer.

However, it seemed to be their lucky day. Nothing exploded, and Tony had not another one of these funny little surprises like the day before, where he had bitten into his bread to find that parts of it were already moldy.

Jarvis gave the announcement after the exact time of estimation, making the inventor slam his hands on the table in something not unlike gleeful anticipation, then hurry over towards the printer, its loud rattling and howling was almost pitiful to hear.

In a few seconds, he was already skipping through the first files.

Leaving himself a bit more of time, Loki was behind him a few moments later, watching with him the ever-changing images of technical drawings and lines and lines of data on the paper-sheets. It was a huge waist of paper, but whatever, Tony was satisfied.

"That's it for now, Jarv."

"Very welcome, Sir."

"Ah, just one more thing: Anything happened? Anybody trying to wangle some information out of you since we've talked last time?"

It was always good to know how much the others knew, even though he would not be able to do anything about it from here. Perhaps they had already stopped searching, perhaps they were turning every shabby stone to look for him and Loki - either way, he was curious about the happenings outside of this little concrete-cuboid they were trapped in.

"There have been numerous attempts to access your personal server on the 8th, 11th and 12th of September, yet all of them futile. I also recorded a number of calls, all of them assigning to either unknown callers or Mr. Rogers. He never left a message, though."

"Yet, Loki's interest seemed real and somehow tickled his vanity."

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For the time being, I'm running the emergency protocol as ordered and, if I am allowed to say so myself, doing quite fine."

Tony nodded with a satisfied smirk, suppressing the little sting Steve's name still caused, then patted on the monitor twice before he turned around to face Loki again.

"Well then, let's start."

"See this here? If need to channel that energy, it will strengthen one simple repulsor beam about 35%."

Tony tapped on one of the digits in the tables in front of him.
In lack of his usual holographic screens, he had pushed two huge drawing boards together which were now covered in paper sheets, partly from the print outs, partly self-drawn. He had had a little dispute with Loki about whether it was safe to put data about the Tesseract and Hydra weapons on the board as well, yet in the end the genius had been successful in posing that Adams and his loyal pack of dogs were not able to deduct the necessary conclusions from them.

Loki's gaze flickered over the piece of paper, then he merely nodded once and hummed in approval, absent-mindedly blowing away a strand of hair in his face.

His interest had faded a bit during the day, since most of the work had to be done by Tony alone anyway – no matter how relaxed the atmosphere had been recently.

Therefore, the god had withdrawn in a corner some time during the day, reading through the collected information on Hydra-weapons (he had only snorted in contempt after Tony had briefly explained to him the history and motives of said organization), before he eventually had appeared to look over the engineer's shoulder again.

This procedure had continued for a few hours, until now, when Tony had called the god to inspect one little problem which had occurred.
(Also, he was awfully tired, but he had been having such a good flow that he needed some external cause to allow himself a few minutes of rest.)

Tony suppressed a yawn, glancing over to Loki, who was still studying the chart he had spoken of.

Since he seemed to be in thoughts, Tony had more time than usual to let his eyes wander over the Loki's features.
He was looking better with every day now. Of course still pale and somewhat haggard and still with these deep dark circles under his eyes, but, well, one was starting to appreciate little improvements under the given conditions.

In fact, one could almost see the magic return to his body.

It sounded stupid, yes, but there was a certain... something, a certain radiance which started to return, a radiance Tony had never noticed before as something unusual and only now realized was the unmistakable aura of somebody superhuman.
The dullness of Loki's hollowed cheeks slowly was dispelled and his eyes, which had looked so milky when they had looked at him whilst his body had been fighting the alien fever, now had that intense glow again.

Tony had never been one for detailed remembering of facial features, but the color of Loki's eyes had burned into him from the beginning – and somehow, the return of their fatal intensity came
together with a grim knowledge that maybe, it was not the worst scenario to be in this with the God of Mischief out of all people.

He may have still looked wasted and somewhat greasy (that was something which would not change too soon, for both of them, since they had no running water and only the disgusting brackish water from some reservoir), but he looked, as shameful as it may sounded, better than the genius himself right now.

Yet what vexed Tony most was the fact that he obviously did not grow facial hair, except for eyebrows and lashes, since his cheeks were as smooth as on the day he had met him the first times.

He ran his hand over the stubble (stubble - understatement of the year!) of his own face, then frowned.

It was not that he had not looked at Loki for the whole time, but only now he was able to fully admire the fact that the frozen growth process of any form of a beard was a state which did decidedly not apply to Loki's hair.

Never a man with problems of physical contact, Tony reached out to one of the black curls, rolling it around his finger.
Loki's choice of hair-style had been in need of getting used to the last time as well, but the idea that this was what the god seemed to tame with whatever it had been he smeared into his hair was downright ridiculous.

Tony chuckled, the sound finally causing the intense blue of the god's eyes to turn from the drawing board, dart to his hand and then focus on him in an expression of slight annoyance.

“What is it?”

“Never had the time to admire that Azkaban-style you're having going on there.”

It was clear that Loki did not understand, but he was smart enough to notice when one was making fun of him.
The god cocked one eyebrow in a dismissive way, looking down on Tony.

“As glad I am that your motivation to work seems to be returning, I could as happily go without the return of your peculiar form of wit.”

“Oh, that bad?”, Tony teased, a smirk still playing in the corners of his mouth.

“Especially”, the god emphasized, “from a mortal whose poor excuse of a beard would be considered an infamy not only among the dwarves of Svartálfar.”

There was still a certain touchiness between them since there had not been the time to establish lines between humor and insult, which was even harder when both could be used as means for the other.
Yet, after the last days, Tony started to adjust himself to their new situation and with it came a certain sense of self-esteem.
He had seen Loki on the edge of death, he had saved his life and he was the one to build him the best fucking weapon he would ever use – he would make fun of his hair like he wanted to.

“Don't get too worked up about my beard, Mr. Baby Face.”

“You do not really think I will have that sort of conversation with you now, do you?”
“Obviously not.”

They fell into silence again, but Tony had not the mind to return to the graphics on the board. He yawned again – god, he would kill for a coffee now! - then left Loki where he was, not without flipping one of Loki’s strands of hair when he passed him.

If the trickster really was angry at him, he would be at his throat now – but he was not, and his barely noticeable eye-roll seemed only half-heartedly.

-----

Loki watched the other man leave for the mattress, if for the purpose of sleeping or mere testing not clearly definable and he did not really care to find out.

At a loss of something better to do, the god continued to look at the printed graphics on the drawing board absently minded, while licking his fingers, which had become quite a habit these past few days.

His skin was covered in a thin and itching layer of salt from dried sweat, and it was especially nasty on his hands (Loki hated the feeling of sticky hands) and his face, where it burned unpleasantly on the more sensitive skin around his eyes.

Cleaning said parts through licking and the use of wet fingers made him feel more like a cat than a god, but Loki did not have much of a choice and everything was better than the alternative. There was no way he would get even close to the rotten water from the bathroom,

Through the salty taste reminded of the rather nasty condition of his skin, Loki glanced to the fridge.

He knew that they actually had clean water, but it was rare and only for the purpose of drinking.

But there were still three bottles in the fridge, and they would get new ones in four days....maybe he could take on or two of the water bottles to clean himself, the remaining one was surely enough for Stark? Loki did not see the human drinking much anyway.

Having made a decision, he went over to the fridge, opened it and immediately spotted the bottles in the almost empty fridge, filled with fresh and clean water.

The god threw a cautious look over to where Stark sat.

The view onto the human's mattress was blocked by a rather huge complex of machines, and the silence from the other end of the room indicated that the other was most likely resting, maybe even sleeping.

Well, now or never.

The god reached out into the fridge, removing two of the three bottles. The plastic was heavy and his hand, it's surface covered in a thin layer of humidity, pleasantly cold and refreshing on his overheated skin.

He set the two bottles aside in order to remove the gray hoodie and the shirt, exposing his pale skin to the air and skipped the inspection of his body this time, going right for what he had been planning all along.

The cap of the first bottle was unscrewed and the god gave a good amount of water over his hand, slashing it over his greasy chest,where most of the precious liquid ended up on his skin, yet it was unavoidable that some drops fell on the ground instead.

Loki did not mind much - what were a few drops of water? - and continued to clean himself
tenderly, not leaving out an inch of the exposed parts, not even drying himself, the coldness on his skin felt much too good to remove it without having savored it. The next splash of water was given over his neck and a few strands of his too long hair, most of it flowing down in droplets that ran down his back, disappearing somewhere in the rough fabric of his jeans.

Loki continued his work for a couple if minutes, taking his time with the water, pouring the last remains of the bottle over his head just for the sake of cooling his way too warm body, shortly after opening the second one, continuing the process with more focus on his arms and face.

Too late he heard the footsteps approaching and there was no chance too hide what he had just been doing; despite pretending otherwise, Loki knew that it would be a crude understatement to say that Stark was 'not pleased' with the sight he got.

Furiously annoyed was a more proper description and the human only stared for a few seconds, before he found his voice again.

"What the fuck are you doing there?!"

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"To call it a 'shower' would be highly exaggerated, but I am doing my very best."

The little fucker did not even try to hide what he was doing! He just plainly admitted wasting their drinking-water on his oh-so-precious skin and he was not even ashamed of it. Despite their improved relationship and the progress they were making in their work, Tony saw red from one second to the other. The reason itself was actually almost ridiculous, but it just successfully triggered so many things at once that he simply snapped. Not only that Loki was stealing from that poor bit of possession they shared, no, he was betraying their foundation of trust, the only reason why he was able to work with him in the first place and Tony felt downright insulted that the god had thought he would not even notice.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I'm using that piss coming from the faucet for days now without being whiny- what prohibits you from doing the same?!!"

In a few steps he was there, grabbing the half-emptied bottle out of Loki's hand - which, contrary to his intentions, made a lot of it splash to the ground - and slammed it on the table next to them without taking his eyes of Loki, who was not letting himself be forced backwards by the genius' offensive stance.

"This is drinking water, you spoiled fool! Even though YOU might not be dependent from it, I certainly am!"

His furious glare burned itself into Loki's eyes and even though he seemed physically calm, despite his raised voice, he was barely containing himself. His fingers flexed once and he was just waiting for Loki to give the wrong answer. The god did not let him wait too long.

"It is your problem if you use the bathroom, i won't. And anyway, I do not see the reason to throw a tantrum. They will bring new water some time during the next days, so you will not suffer too mu-

The next second, Tony's hands were on Loki's chest, pushing the god backwards with a bit more force than necessary.
Loki merely stumbled two steps, yet his eyes went wide for a split-second, whether from surprise about the guts it took to attack him - after all, both of them had regenerated their health quite a bit since the last time they had wrestled on the ground in that pathetic manner - or from actually being caught off-guard once, but Tony did not think twice about any consequences this might have.

"What do YOU know when they will come back?! Have you any idea how it sucks to be trapped in a shithole like this without water? Because I have, and I tell you, I will not build shit for you if you do that again, are we clear?"

This time, Loki's answer came physically rather than verbally, as he only made an irritated snort and then grabbed Tony on his shirt, forcing him backwards until he was crowded against the fridge with the trickster towering above him, his naked chest heaving and falling quickly in his anger, his wet hair leaving small sprinkles on Tony's face with every movement he made. Their eyes locked for just a second and Tony's body tensed in defiance, his hands reflexively closed around Loki's forearms.

"Listen, mortal, you-"

"The fuck I will do!"

A short struggle occurred, a jumble of arms and hands and clenched teeth, but was ended as quickly as it had begun when Loki thrashed him against the fridge again, impressively making clear that his powers were returning and even now should not be underestimated. Both of them breathing heavily, they stared at each other for a few seconds and Tony would have just loved to kick his knee in Loki's stomach, just to see the other bend and stop being so much taller than he was.

"I'd appreciate if you'd take your fucking hands of me now or I'll ram my knee into your groin."

"I doubt you would want the consequences of that just to avenge the loss of a bottle of water."

Tony clenched his jaws together, actually considering to make his threat come true when, all of a sudden, the harsh grip of Loki's hands on his upper arms left and the god stepped back a little to give him some space. The inventor glared at him for a second, then rudely pushed out of the small space between Loki and the fridge, withdrawing a few feet so that he was out of reach. The object of their fight was still standing on the table, almost empty and without a cap.

"I am sorry."

Loki's apology came out of nowhere and actually surprised him, taking the wind from his sails a bit. For a moment, he was unsure what to do. He was still angry - and now also damn thirsty - and he just refused to let the whole story be. Loki should know that he was a little prick - he had saved his life for fuck's sake, he should show a bit of gratitude.

In a defiant gesture, he grabbed the bottle from the table and emptied it in one gulp, throwing the empty plastic in a corner where it landed with a clattering noise. Then he freed his forehead from the nasty strands of hair there by running a hand through it.

"Damn well, you are."

The way the god was standing there he did not look any better than before his little 'shower' - just wet. In another situation, Tony would have found it funny how desperate Loki was to maintain at least a bit of his facade, but now being a little 'sorry' was not enough.
He would not come at him again, though, he was pretty strong actually. Tony had not worked out for months...

"Yet, I will do it again, if there is enough of it. I will announce it beforehand, though, if you insist."

"You can kiss my ass, you know that?", he was already moving closer again, easily infuriated by Loki's lax apology, but thought it better and stopped before he reached the god. He was not even angry about the water so much - it just pissed him off that he had actually started thinking it meant something that they were in the same boat here. That it made them, if not companions - that was utopistic - at least equally fucked up and therefore somehow partners.

Yet, if Loki insisted on securing himself any upcoming advantages, it was just proof enough that this would not work out as easily (ha! easily...) as he had thought.

"'Kay, working together is no walk in the park. I hate that, too, really, i hate sharing food - but keep in mind that you're cutting your own flesh if you piss me off, right? I need that water, otherwise concentration is a thing of impossibility with no caffeine or anything. I don't give a single shit on how you look or smell, I've seen worse. So stop that. Don't do it again."

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"I didn't know that you need it so much.", Loki answered, knowing pretty well that this was a rather lame excuse, but it was better than saying nothing.
Stark's face twitched at the comment, seemingly even more irritated than before.

"You could have asked, goddammit, the three bottles were barely enough for me alone, and now we only have one left! How is that supposed to work? We will get new water in four days, not earlier, and there is nothing else to drink here."

Something in Stark's voice changed and the anger made room for something else, an almost desperate notion in his tone, as he apparently slowly become aware of the situation he was stuck in.

Suddenly, Loki really felt sorry for what he had done, the realization of his egoistic act slowly creeping into his consciousness and caused a tight feeling in his throat.
Stark was not overreacting this time, like had had done it back in the hotel room when Loki had tipped away his booze. This time, he was honestly concerned, because he really, really needed that water.

"I didn't know...", he repeated his previous statement, this time quieter, more reserved, maybe almost remorseful.

"Doesn't change a thing, that won't get me the water back.", Stark responded with a resigned sound in his voice. He slowly returned to his mattress, his back now turned to Loki, then he slumped down on it as if he had been deprived of all his strength.
Loki was left behind, still dripping wet and standing awkwardly exposed in the great room, a feeling of guilt that settled stronger and stronger in his mind with every passing moment.

"I will get you new water."

The words were out of his mouth before the true content had even unfolded its whole meaning in his brain, but the more unreasonable, emotional part of him took over, demanding him to compensate what he had done.

Yet, Stark seemed even more surprised than Loki himself for that offering. His head shot up from where it had been resting against the drawn-up knees, dark brown eyes suddenly attentive and full
of disbelief.

"You want to do what? Did you forget that we are stuck here, confined, no way outside?"

The human made a wide gesture through the room and towards the doors which would probably lead outside, but were still all externally locked, the movement followed by a short, nervous laugh.

"As if a few doors could keep me in here. I already escaped places far better secured than this one and in a far more miserable condition as the one I'm currently in. You will see, Stark, I will get you water."

Stark did not look convinced, but that did not keep Loki from sticking to his plan. On the contrary, it only urged him to accomplish it even faster.

Loki felt a motivation he had not felt for weeks now. His steadily increasing strength, mixed together with the sheer boredom that came from being stuck in a plain room with nothing to do, made him eager to take action on his own, to do something useful.

Even if it meant to get water, a task his former self would have thought beneath his dignity under any circumstances.

Summoning his magic after such a long time without use took some concentration, but was nothing he could not accomplish. Within a few seconds, Loki was able to leave his position, now invisible, replaced by an illusion of himself.

"Don't touch it, or it will dissolve.", Loki instructed Stark, whose head jerked into the direction where the real god was standing, a little startled.

His illusion meanwhile settled down on his own bed at the other end of the room, leaning against the wall in a calm, relaxed position, pretending to be asleep.

The teleportation spell that carried him out of the room, to the surface, demanded more energy, yet Loki could devoid that much, it was only for a short distance. It maybe meant that they would have to wait one, or maybe two days more until Loki could summon the Tesseract - but what were two days?

It was deep night as Loki appeared outside, his back to the building in its cellar they were confined in.

Apparently it was some kind of small factory or plant, long abandoned, the construction itself crumbling and dirty, the surrounding tiles shifted maybe through water and at some parts even covered by loose desert sand.

Yet the surrounding mesh wire fence was - except for a little bit of rust - mostly intact, too high for Loki to jump over it and he really did not want to climb over the construction, not with all that barbwire sticking out of it.

So, he strode along the fence, until he found a weak spot which was expanded to a larger opening with a little bit of fiddling, large enough to fit his lean frame through it.

Teleportation might have been easier, but the god only wanted to use magic if it was necessary. After all, he had no idea if he would need it on his way, unexpected things could always happen, especially if one had just escaped a pack of alien assassins only three weeks prior.

Once off the old factory's area, Loki needed a few moments to orient himself, but his aim was quickly found, marked through a bright haze of electric light radiating into the otherwise dark and star-covered sky.
A strong and warm breeze came from north, ruffled his loose shirt and long hair, whirled up dry desert sand that was soon lost in the wide wasteland stretching out in front of the god.

Unerringly, Loki started to walk, following the old street that lead towards the city.

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For a few minutes it was rather uncomfortable with the hallucination sitting just a few feet away from him, without movement and 'asleep', if you could call it such. Tony found himself staring mesmerized for a few seconds, all of his previous anger and great skepticism about Loki's plan gone for now as he tried to figure out the miracle of creating a constant 3D-illusion out of thin air. He could not come to a conclusion and unfortunately, he did not have the right instruments to have Jarvis run a little series of tests to kill the time until Loki would return.

It took him exactly 28 minutes (he checked the time on the computer screen since they were denied a simple clock as well) and a lot of aimless wandering around to develop an uneasy feeling in his gut about the whole thing. He had not even known that Loki had enough magic collected already to teleport himself again, actually he had not seen anything of Loki's magic since the god had crashed in his Malibu mansion. Still, he was officially gone now - Tony had checked every corner of the great hall, even the tiny bathroom - and had left him alone for the sake of getting him ... water?

No, there had to be something cooking, he could sense it.

As if Loki would waste his precious magic, the one thing he was making all the fuss about the whole time they had been together, just to get him a bit of water for compensation. It was a stupid thing to do with a high risk of their doings being exposed, it would throw Loki's recovery back for an uncertain amount of time and, above all, it could only be explained by pure altruism. Tony felt like he had the right to be skeptic.

However, maybe Loki actually did what he had said. There was a chance that the god did all of this just to make up for being an egoistic dick, that he actually cared for Tony's well-being - or at least for him to be functional enough to continue their work without avoidable interruptions.

After over 6 hours, Tony was sure Loki had left him in the lurch.

Surely, he had gotten cold feet, had shown out to be as inconsequential as he had been at his failed attempt for world domination. After all, the situation they were stuck in was not quite as they had hoped for - it was pretty bad actually. They had been making progress, finally, but it was more than imaginable that the god had just waited long enough to collect enough of his magic to get the fuck away from him and look for a better partner for his plan.

In a way, the inventor could not blame him for it - if he had had the choice, he would not stay in this gridlock himself.

The hall was creepily empty without Loki, even though Tony had never experienced problems with being alone. He tried to sleep, but only succeeded once and was too startled to fall asleep again when he woke up over an hour later and Loki was still gone. The rest of the time he wandered around the hall, talked to Jarvis or muttered to himself, pretending to be not concerned.

He asked his A.I. to tap the surveillance tapes from the surrounding area in search for Loki, yet he knew from the beginning that he would not find a thing. If the trickster was still somewhere around, he would be invisible, of course.
The only thing which stopped his growing panic to fully break through - what the hell should he tell Adams' men when they came back and found Loki gone?! - was the fact that the hallucination was still there. It had not flickered nor vanished yet and Tony changed from regarding it as a last security for hope of a rude mockery, left here to remind him that he had been desperate and blind enough to get involved with Loki.

It had been almost 10 hours since Loki had left and Tony was not far from actually going mad.

He cursed Loki, he cursed himself, his gaze switched over to the door every few minutes in anticipation of the goon squad and the other times he checked constantly if the illusion was still in place. It was, but somehow it did not comfort him any longer.

10 hours - 10 HOURS!

It had occurred to him more than once that Loki might actually had left with the motivation to get him water, but had been caught on his way out or back in or wherever, but that thought was the one he tried to suppress more than all the others.

Better be left to die by a traitor than losing the one person he could rely upon - and then still be left to die.

When the hallucination eventually moved, the genius was not even sure if his eye-sight was not playing a trick on him (lately, it had not been that uncommon). His eyes followed cautiously the walking illusion until it left his field of vision to vanish in the small bathroom. Despite his exhaustion, Tony was on his feet in mere seconds, following it to see what was happening.

He gave in to the small hint of hope that Loki might actually have returned - after 10 fucking hours! - with some water, that he just had taken so long because he was moving by foot and in an area completely unknown to him, and then he heard a loud clattering sound from behind the door. Speeding up his steps, he reached the bathroom just the second Loki became visible again: hair tousled from the wind, cheeks flushed and lips slightly parted, but smiling triumphantly when he met Tony's gaze.

Two sixpacks of water were standing to his feet.

For a second, Tony's jaw dropped, but he found his composure again pretty quickly.

"You damned son of a bitch, I though you were gone for good now!"

Loki's brows knitted in a mixture of confusion and offense, but he cared for his clothes first, brushing off remains of sand and dirt from it, before he let his fingers run through his long hair. Tony was reduced to shaking his head in disbelief a few times, leaning against the door frame until Loki pushed himself past him to step into the light of the greater hall.

"Am I deducing rightly that there is still a lack of trust in me?", he asked almost casually, though Tony could hear from his voice that it interested him more than he would tell.

"Have you any sense of time? You were gone almost 10 hours! The only excuse you got is that you got this bottled up directly from the Niagara falls, but since it says 'Evian' on it, I doubt that that explanation will do."

After these 10 hours of waiting, all the accumulated stress was finally released and the billionaire actually had a wide grin plastered on his face, even though he had wanted nothing more than to rip Loki a new one just a few minutes ago.
It was something to know that Loki would stay at his side when he had no other chance, but since he actually could have just left him here and never return, it gave the partnership a whole new dimension. Somehow it was ... nice.

You really had to lower your standards to appreciate that the person you actually should have hated was not running away from you the second it became possible, but even though he refused to tell himself, Tony realized now that he actually needed Loki. He was dependent on him - not just to survive this whole madness, but because he had given up anything for it. If Loki would leave now, too, he would have nothing.

Not that Loki would ever hear anything from this chain of thoughts.

"We are in a desert, Stark, and this particular piece of landscape is not overly rich on civilization. It took me ages to reach back to the city we came from."

"Yeah, I know, Nevada's not actually over-populated."

While Loki sat down on the mattress - even though he would never admit, it seemed the trip had tired him a lot - Tony got the sixpacks and stored them somewhere in a corner of the bathroom, not without taking one bottle out of it first. He returned to Loki, leaning against a work desk a few feet from him, tasting a gulp of water.

"Well, I thought it to taste like freedom and rebellion, but it actually tastes just like plastic."

He threw the closed bottle to Loki on the mattress, who could only muster a tired smile at Tony's comment. Still, he took the bottle to drink from it, not holding back - they had enough now. When he set it down again, his eyes wandered to Tony's face, suspicion in his gaze.

"You're still grinning."

The way he stated it it sounded like Tony was doing something downright offending or ridiculous.

"Don't mind me. It's just the simple man's pleasure of not dying alone in a rancid cellar like this."
After the long and tiring trip, hours of constant walking through the vast desert and the first greater use of magic in weeks, Loki had retreated to his mattress, sleeping like a dead for what felt like an entire day.

At least he wasn't suffering from nightmares, not anymore, contrary to Stark, who apparently never slept longer than three hours. The god still clearly remembered the terrors he had experienced in his feverish haze during the few days in the hospital, but now, with all wounds healed, the infection cleared out of his body and even the malnutrition on its retreat, Loki's mind was clearer than it had been for months under the persecution of the Chitauri.

The first thing he noticed upon waking, even before opening his eyes, was the constant and fast sound of fingers hitting the old and yellowed keyboard, resonating from the empty concrete walls of the hall.

Usually, Loki would have found the noise disturbing, might even have demanded the creator of said noise to stop whatever he was doing there, but strangely, it did not annoy him this time. On the opposite, it even gave a certain feeling of... calmness. Maybe it had to do with the fact that if Stark was working, moving them closer to their both aim, maybe because it was only a confirmation that everything was still as it had been when Loki went to sleep, no danger, no awful surprises, just Stark working, as he had been the entire past days.

Yet, the ease Loki felt by hearing this sound could have also had a different origin. Maybe it was the mere knowledge that there was someone else here in this room, someone who was neither his friend nor his enemy, but what could be considered a comrade in arms, someone that could offer support in this difficult situation, that made him feel at peace for at least a few minutes.

However, after a couple of minutes of pleasant dozing, half asleep, half listening to the clapping noises, the slowly rising urge to do something grew stronger and demanded him to leave the dirty mattress.

"Everything working fine?", he asked as he stepped beside Stark to look on the old screen, this time not only seeing numbers, but lines that could be a part of the Iron Man armor. The mortal turned around on his chair, glancing up at Loki.

"To the most part, I'm adding a few additions I had in mind for a while longer now, but after..."

There was no need to continue the sentence, Loki already knew what the human had been about to mention and did not comment on it. As before, Stark simply skipped the issue and went on talking about something else.

"You want to have breakfast?"

The god tilted his head, a bit taken aback by the question. Never before had Stark asked anything like that, their previous talks had merely consisted of the most necessary questions and answers. For most people, such a question would have been utterly banal, mundane and ordinary interaction,
but for Loki, it was like a peace-offering.

A peace-offering that clearly had to do with his actions from the previous day and an attempted redemption for everything Stark had messed up between them these past weeks

"Yes."

It was a short and single word, but it meant much. Loki accepted the truce Stark had offered him, as Stark had accepted the god's amend for the water bottles.

It was not the food that was important, it was nothing more than bread anyway, but the simple act of doing something together without being forced into the situation, was something new on its own.

Stark was already at the fridge and had removed four pieces of bread from it, the mere sight of the mushy white substance enough to make Loki's stomach convulse with disgust.

It was not as if he had much of a choice, though, and right now, he depended on every source of energy he could get and so he took the two slices of bread he got handed, nibbling on it without much motivation.

Stark had leaned himself casually against the dirty kitchen counter, chewing his own food with more appetite than Loki, looking over to the god once he was finished with his first piece.

The mortal had just opened his mouth to say something, when the old metal door at the end of the hall was thrown open, and not only one, but three of Adam's men came inside, one of them even carrying a machine gun.

Stark's posture immediately changed and went from relaxed to utterly rigid, aware that they had been caught in just the wrong moment, lazily hanging in the kitchen area instead of working as they were supposed to.

"Now look at this.", one of the men said, the huge, bulky one, who had brought them the water last time and whose name Loki had forgotten.

It was not too hard to fathom why they were here, three of them and armed. They had either noticed that Loki had left the building for several hours - which was kind of unlikely, considering that the god had taken care of everything – or their leader was unsatisfied with the results of their work.

"Hey, you can't jus-", Stark tried to intervene, but was harshly interrupted.

"On your knees, hands behind you head!", the man shouted, while his companion pointed his weapon at them, or, more precisely, on Stark's forehead.

The ex-billionaire stood perfectly still for a few moments, pure anger and humiliation playing across his features, before he slowly, very slowly, obeyed and got down on his knees as demanded. Loki followed close behind, yet a little more hesitantly, baring his teeth in a feral expression at their captivators.

Oh, how much he had loved to fight back, to tear this worthless creatures apart until they were nothing but blood and the undefinable remains of human cells!

The magic itself had already built up in Loki's fingertips. It was raging angrily under his skin, as thirsty for blood as its wielder, only held back by his own will, remaining trapped inside his body.

It was not the right time, not yet, and every attempt to fight off their captors might have more bad than good consequences.
They were still dependent on the support, it was the original reason why they had come here, and without the provided goods and the money Adam's put into them - believing he could earn himself his own suit that way – was essential for everything.
And so Loki kept quiet, obeyed and listened to the man, whose tall figure towered threatening in front of them.

"We will only say this one damn time, you listen? Adams wants results and if you can't deliver those, you are fucked. You've had more than a week and there's fucking nothing! If when we will come back next week and there'll still be nothing - you're going to regret that."

The man had come closer with every sentence, now standing right in front of them, gazing down on the two kneeling creatures at his mercy.

"How am I supposed to work properly if you just give m-"

"SHUT UP!"

Had Loki seen it coming that Stark would attempt to speak up against their torturers in the worst possible moment, he would have done something against it - slapped a hand over his mouth, cast a silencing spell or said something by himself to draw the attention on himself rather than Stark – but it was already too late and the muscular man's leg shot up, his knee colliding with Stark's face.

The cracking noise of the engineer's nose breaking echoed through the entire hall, even louder than Stark's strangled scream as he fell on all fours, clutching his bleeding nose with one hand. As if that had not been enough, the man kicked another time, hitting the side of Stark's head with his heavy boot, and another time, aiming for the unprotected stomach now, turning the ex-billionaire into a writhing mess on the floor.

Even for someone who lacked Loki's talent of observing it would have been easy to see that this was not about punishment anylonger. No, the human had tasted blood and his aggression only increased with every hit he landed on Stark. Those other two minions were doing nothing to stop him, as if the engineer on the floor - who had meanwhile stopped in his attempts to fight back and had curled into a ball to protect himself – was not the most important person here.

When the foot hit Stark's head the third time, Loki just could not continue watching the whole spectacle without interfering, he could not allow the other humans to kill the ex-billionaire just because they were too ignorant to notice what damage they caused.

Just before the man could attack Stark's head a fourth time, Loki unfroze from his position and jumped at the mortal, bringing both of them down to the floor with a muffled groan. The god allowed himself to be carried away for a few seconds, his now almost entirely healed body far superior to the one beneath him. Even though he was physically fit and trained in combat, he had no chance when Loki punched him one time, hard enough to render the bulky man almost unconscious. He only stopped in his movement when he felt the cold metal of a machine gun pressing against the back of his head.

"It won't help you if you kill Stark, or injure him beyond a chance of recovery. Your boss needs him.", the god said, voice cold, almost disinterested, although every muscle in his body was tense, expecting the worst.

"And what about you? Who says that we still need you?"
The pressure of the steel increased, no more space left between his skin and the barrel. Loki shut his eyes for a moment, thinking, then opened them again, staring straight ahead.

"Stark needs me. I'm developing the software for him."

The lie went off his lips easily, yet Loki knew that the men would likely not believe him. There was no proof for the truth of his words. However, the seed of doubt was certainly planted: they could not prove the contrary, and the risk of killing him only to see that the work could not be completed without him was too great, at least for now.

The third of the men had meanwhile removed himself from his position under Loki and was now back in a slightly unstable, yet standing position, towering over the crouching god. Considering the angry glare from his eyes, the kick in his side was to be expected, as well as the shortly following one against his head. Although the attacks were far from causing as much damage as they had to Stark, the god fell to the ground, half mimicking the pained curling up, half doing it out of a real attempt to shield himself from the attack.

Adams' men seemed to be satisfied, finally having both of their captives forced into submission.

"Seven days, and if we don't see anything that can be considered a proper result, you two are fucked, clear?"

The man fiddled with his machine gun again, pointing it at Loki's head, until the god hesitantly nodded. It was humiliating, but he needed the three men to be gone as fast as possible. Stark had stopped moving a while ago, and only the heavy rise and fall of his chest implied that he was still alive, but one never knew with these mortals how fast that would change when it came to head injuries.

Loki received a last, painful kick in his stomach, then the three men turned around and left the subterranean hall.

As soon as the heavy metal door fell back into place and the clicking noise indicated that it had again been locked from outside, the god scrambled back to his feet, kneeling down at Stark's side to roll the human on his back. The other's brown eyes were closed, his face smeared with blood from his forehead, nose and mouth which was slightly opened, the sound of a labored, yet fortunately, rather strong breathing coming out of it. Then Stark's entire body shivered and he rolled back onto his side, spitting dark red blood mixed with yellowish bile on the cold concrete beneath, coughing and clutching his injured stomach, yet keeping his eyes pressed shut the entire time.

"Stark."

The human did not react, only kept shuddering and spitting blood from time to time. Some of the purplish-red injuries on his head did not look good at all - no wonder, Loki had felt the steel caps in the boot by himself.

"Stupid human, don't you dare to die because of such a banal attack.", Loki hissed, actually attempting to sound angry, though the words were more spoken out of concern.

When the mortal did not react, he took Stark under the pits of his arms dragging him over to his mattress, where the unmoving body was placed on his side, just in case he had to vomit blood.
or something else again.
Due to the lack of a better cushion, Loki removed his own sweater – the stench of blood and
diseases still clung to it, but that was not important right now – folded the cloth and placed it
carefully under Stark's head.

As he was done with that, Loki darted off for the bathroom, almost running, to fetch a bottle of
water (they had kept it in there because it was the only room without cameras), returning to Stark
in less than a minute.

Applying some of the water to a small cloth – it was impossible to find a completely clean one
around here- the god began to clean the wounds from the blood, with every wipe more able to the
damage that had been done.
Only when he was done with wiping the fresh red liquid off the other's face and had stopped to
examine a rather nasty laceration on the forehead, he noticed that Stark had opened his eyes again,
locking up at Loki, exhausted, in pain, but still alive and conscious.

"Now look what you got for your big mouth.", Loki said, barely able to hide the relief in his voice.

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Tony tried a long-drawn, painful groan, but he could not, because his face hurt with every
movement he made and it felt like if he dared breathing in another time, he would only swallow
blood. Still, he could not hold back a comment, since the concerned look on Loki’s face was just
urging him to appear like he would take the whole thing lightly.

"Broke my nose, didn't they? Fucking bastar-
"

His speech was cut short by another coughing fit and he convulsed on the mattress, sprinkling the
floor beneath it with red spots. When it was over he simply stayed in the position on his side,
clutching his arms around his midst, eyes closed with a strained expression.
Fuck taking it lightly - he felt fucking miserable.
He'd rather abstain from any further movement at all, because right now he could not even make
out what part of him hurt the most.

God, he'd probably just die of inner bleeding and wouldn't even know.

He could not remember the last time he had been beaten up so badly without being in his suit, it
was probably more than half a lifetime ago. The stupid fucking morons, beating the shit out of him
and demanding satisfying results in the same time - if thinking would not feel like making his head
explode, he could easily get exasperated about so much stupidity.
Yet, all he wanted to do now, was being alone until the pain became a little less and he was able to
think again.

A hand on his arm however reminded him that Loki was still there and when he opened his eyes
again, he could see his look, somewhere between concern and high concentration, which told him
that he would not leave too quickly.

It was a dumb thing to think about now, but the genius realized that this was the first time Loki
touched him without it having any other means than pure comfort.

The hand was just there with a firm, but careful grip, not pushing or pulling him somewhere. Just a
reminder that he was not alone - even though not being alone changed nothing about the fact that
this was both humiliating and still damn painful.
Tony cracked a smile anyway - although it probably looked frightening right now and pretty soon
derailed in a painful grimace - and then tried to push himself up in a sitting position, just to prove himself that it was not that bad and maybe a bit to prove Loki that he was okay.

He failed miserably, though, his failure emphasized by Loki's hissed demands he should not even think of getting up now, not before they had done something about his condition.

"What you wanna do 'bout it anyway?", Tony muttered, lying on his back again with closed eyes and trying to talk by moving lips and face as less as possible.

The longer he was conscious again, the better it seemed to get, although only gradually, and when he did not move, he could almost ignore the throbbing pain everywhere on his head and in his abdomen. The feeling of nausea which had befallen him the second he had moved his head an inch from the ground was also receding again, giving him the illusion that he might have got off more easily than he had previously thought.

Maybe it was just because everything started to blur again, thoughts becoming a bit fuzzy and disconnected. He could not recall the exact number of kicks he had gotten against his head, but he supposed this was not a good sign.

"My magic unfortunately can not heal you completely, not without draining my energy up to a condition where I will be of no further use anymore...", Loki answered, sounding a bit absent-minded, then he touched Tony lightly on the shoulder to get his attention.

"Here, drink a bit."

He was holding the half-empty water bottle right under Tony's nose and for once the inventor gratefully complied, sipping a few times on it, careful enough not to cough again, but efficiently dispelling the rough scratching pain in his throat.

Just when he had laid his head back on the mattress and closed his eyes again, he could feel Loki pushing up his shirt and even though he seemed to attempt on carefulness, Tony inhaled sharply and opened his eyes again to see what was the matter.

The cold hand which had previously been placed so reassuringly on his arm, was now sliding down the skin on his stomach. It was not hard to see the building bruises down there, some parts under the skin already turning dark red and Tony just uttered a silent 'Shit!', squinting his eyes when Loki added a bit more pressure on certain points, looking for inner bleeding and serious injuries.

The god's serious, concentrated expression and the seemingly expert movements of his hands indicated that he seemed to be in good hands, still Tony would rather have him take his hands off than cause a sharp jolt of pain every time his fingers moved.

When he eventually did, he pulled the shirt down with it and sat back two feet, as if after the closeness he needed some distance to articulate his thoughts coherently. Tony opened one eye to glance over to him, but his sight was blurred. He really could not need another concussion right now...

"I can not find anything alarming."

"It does feel pretty alarming..."

"You will survive, Stark. Just stop being so insolent and hasty and it will be better in a few days."

Somehow, Loki did not succeed in conveying neither confidence nor real condescension and Tony felt like they both knew that it was not exactly the kicks in the abdomen that were problematic, but
the ones against the head that would take a bit more time to heal.
Time they did not have - not just because their stupid ultimatum of one week, but because they
needed to finally make progress - and there would be no progress if Tony could not work.
Every day they stayed here was a lost day.

"My head feels funky."

"It looks horrible."

"How uplifting, thanks."

They both fell silent again.
The next time Loki said something, Tony did not understand at first and he realized he had been
drifting to unconsciousness again. His rasped breathing stuttered for a second, then he looked over
to the god. It was awfully exhausting to move his head like this and even harder to coordinate his
lips and tongue to form words.

"What?"

"I said, it would be a shame for you to end like this. Think of our plan. Think of your woman."

Tony did not quite comprehend why Loki was saying something like this. Even though he liked to
think so, he did not feel like dying. It should feel better to die, your body was supposed to release
all those hormones which made you feel all fluffy and safe and his body certainly did not release
anything than pain right now. He felt way to miserable to be actually be close to dying, he was just
awfully tired and dizzy.

Maybe Loki actually was concerned. It was nice, almost as nice as to have a plan of revenge.

"If you don't shut up, I'll die just to annoy you...", he mumbled, keeping his eyes open just long
enough to see Loki smile.

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Loki felt more than relieved that – despite severe head-injuries – Stark was still able to show his
usual wit, what meant that he was indeed far from dying.

The god had no idea what he would do in case of Stark's death.
It was an unpleasant, yet very possible outcome, if one regarded their entire situation; still he had
not wasted a single thought to that possibility.

If Stark died, Loki's entire plan would be ruined, without any chance of reinstatement, with the
only person gone who would work in cooperation with him. In such a case, the god's only option
was to run and hide, and watch worlds being torn apart around him, until he would be eventually
discovered, too, and then would experience a violent death.

Because one thing was for certain:
No matter how strong his magic was, how destructive his fire-spells, how irritating his illusion or
how strong the beasts he could shape his body into - he had no chance against the force that lurked
in the darkness of the Universe.
No one had.

At least not with their current weapons.

Yet, fortunately, Stark was not dying, although he might have looked like it with the ugly cuts on
his forehead, the corpse-like pale skin and the exhausted expression on his featured.

"Hold still."

Having made a decision, Loki reached out with his hand and rested it on the mortal's forehead, who had attempted to sit up at the god's words. He was easily pressed back down onto the mattress, even seemed to relax under his hand, noticing that there was no painful medical treatment to come.

"What are you doing?", the mortal mumbled with closed eyes, apparently enjoying the touch on his skin (which might have been due to the soothing cold emitting from Loki's hand) and did not attempt to rise another time.

"I will heal you... it will take a few minutes and might feel a little strange, but-

At this, Stark's eyes suddenly opened, and he made another abrupt attempt to sit up, with more eagerness than before. Only the firm pressure of Loki's hand on his forehead held him back this time.

The human seemed to be a little bit distressed, through Loki had no explanation what the reason for that could be. He wasn't afraid of his magic, was he?

"No no no, you won't heal me, you need this magic for the Tesseract, not for this. I'm fine, really."

"You're making a fool out of yourself, Stark, just think a moment. I won't be able to summon the Tesseract within the next two weeks. They will return in only one week. We need to have something to show them, we can't effort to lose their support, not yet. The cube can wait a week longer, but for now, I have to take care of your concussion."

Stark's brown eyes were fixed on Loki's green ones, his brows knitted in concentration. Even though the pupils were barely visible through the dark iris, the god saw that the one in the human's right eye was much further dilated that the other one.

Definitely a concussion.

However, Stark had finally stopped protesting, apparently understanding Loki's point. The only response he got was a well audible sigh, before the mortal closed his eyes again, silently accepting his fate - or too tired or resigned to argue further. Maybe both.

Well, Stark had no reason to complain, it was only for his welfare.

"The spell will create an itching feeling. It is normal.", the god warned before the magic gathered in his fingertips – previously summoned to destroy, now ought to heal – was released into the bloody tissue beneath.

Stark shifted beneath his hand, his eyes blinking open from now and then, apparently irritated by the strange sensation on his forehead. The electric tingle of magic was strong enough to send small shudders through the mortal's body at the strange sensation of skin and blood vessels knitting themselves back together.

Bruises, that would have needed weeks to heal, vanished within a few seconds and the slight swell of the brain behind the layer of bone retreated as if there had never been any damage.

When the god removed his hand, there was nothing but tiny, pale scars left - maybe too small to be seen through mortal's eyes. With relief, Loki noticed the human seemed visibly better now, his eyes open once again, focused and attentively staring at Loki.

"That was kind of strange and exciting at the same time."

His response came after seconds of wordlessly look at each other and with one movement, the
mortal was back in a sitting position, no longer held back by Loki. His head feeling a bit heavy after the use of his magic, the god watched how Stark's hand went up to feel the new skin on his head, scratching it in a futile attempt to get rid of the lingering phantom tingle under his skin.

Loki knew that feeling all to well and perfectly remembered how he had scratched his newly healed wound the first time he had been healed by such a spell. He had been a small child, had barely learned how to walk, when he had had to endure such a procedure after falling face-first into one of the larger rose-bushes in the royal gardens. Back then, he remembered, it had been everything else than a pleasant experience, but thinking now of it, everything was clouded in a nostalgic haze that made the god desperately wish back to this times. Only that there was no way back, only the way forward, a way that would not be pleasant either. The only good thing in thing in his current situation was, that he had not to go through entirely on his own.

"Thank you, I guess..."

Stark's voice tore Loki out of his thoughts and he needed a second to get back. He had not even expected the mortal to thank him, since, in his opinion, he had merely acted the way it was necessary.

"Let's just make the best of it.", Loki replied, then set up a serious expression, “And don't be that reckless again, at least until we can allow us to be a little more brash..."

Loki's voice died down when he noticed that Stark was still looking at him, wearing an unreadable expression.

"Is...is something the matter?"

Only now, the mortal seemed to notice his extensive staring and quickly averted his eyes, shifting on his mattress to get up on his feet, only slightly hesitating because of his aching abdomen.

"No, nothing. Just...thanks...", Stark uttered a little awkwardly, rubbing his injured midsection absentmindedly, yet did not move. Only after a few seconds Loki became aware that Stark was waiting for him, while he sat unmoved on the greasy mattress as if there was nothing better to do.

He then got up to his feet, following the mortal behind the wall of machines, to get some work done.

They had to get out of this place, the sooner the better.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you like the story so far, though we haven't even reached halftime yet. There will probably be 55 chapters, but that might vary a little :D
Next update on monday <3
Pressure

Chapter Notes

The gore tag is there for a reason :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Apparently, deadlines still had a positive effect on his working-pace.

He would not admit it frankly, but he was not exactly looking forward to getting his face mashed again by the foot of a guy whose IQ was probably not even half of his own. If it was not particularly necessary, he liked to avoid pain, contrary to he might appear with his sometimes quite masochistic tendencies. It was damn unpleasant, to use an euphemistic expression, to run around with a stomach as colorful as a sample board and even though he tried, his body refused to accept solid food for the next two days. He had not passed on that piece of information to Loki, but he sensed that the other had noticed it anyway the first time he had vomited the remains of his bread in the toilet bowl.

The condition of his head however was phenomenal. He had no idea how Loki's magic worked, but he could not feel a thing any more. It was no unalloyed joy, though, because seeing how the use of his magic still exhausted Loki to quite an extent was making him worry. For now, the god's magic was the mightiest weapon they got - their only weapon, to be precise - and he was still of the opinion that they could not afford him to be weak. It was contra-intuitional to rely on a power he could not figure out on the most basic level, but if this trip had taught him anything at all, it was relying on far less resources than he had ever thought possible to live from.

So, he was working hard to get things going. From the blueprints and technical drawings he molded the outer forms first, then came down to the finer, more subtle details. Like a second set of arteries and veins, he knew the wiring of his suits by heart, knew which cables to use and where to connect them, knew how to make the hydraulics work, how to make dead material into a moving, living machine. Yet, even though he was working like crazy, he was only progressing slowly. Being thrown back about 20 years in technological development and lacking his robotic helpers - he really missed Dumm-E right now - he was terribly slow, doing everything manually, one bit at a time.

Of course, Jarvis was a big help, but his influence was diminished due to the same lack of digitization. Still, the usual dialogue between the inventor and his creation was most of the time the only noise in the huge room, a lowly held conversation in terms which Loki seemed not interested to follow. Tony never found him talking to his A.I., but he understood that it was probably not the best time to get to know each other.

Although he had the habit of sneaking around barely noticeable, emitting almost no noise until he began to speak, so that Tony sometimes forgot he was even there, the god was not unproductive. The fact that he had no understanding of what Tony was doing did not stop him from offering his help several times, but Tony could do nothing than dismiss it in 9 out of 10 cases. They could not allow themselves even the tiniest error and Loki understood that. It took Tony two days however, to figure out that the god found other ways to ensure their progress was going on
smoothly: there was not one time Tony found the water bottle he always had at his side empty, although he never took a new one himself.

"It looks different without the colors.", the god stated one evening, eyeing the structure of what was to become one of two metallic gauntlets on Tony's hand.

He did not answer at first, just continued stretching and flexing his fingers, adjusting screws from time to time so that every movement became smooth. The repulsor was still missing, but the metal fitting perfectly around his hand already felt good, assuring. He had almost forgot the feeling of power one got inside the suit.

"There'll be no chance to color it in here.", he eventually replied, looking up to Loki and scratching his scruffy beard with his free hand, "but I could not stand the red and gold now anyway."

Loki just nodded thoughtfully.

They did not talk that much since the god had healed him - not that they had ever talked much, to begin with - since Tony was rather occupied by the completion of the gauntlet (he had decided to start with those, since they were good to show off, rather simple to built and made a nice weapon in case it was needed).

Still, they ate together and in the evenings, or late at night, when Tony felt his head protesting against the continuous malnutrition in company with heightened concentration all the time, they sometimes sat together on one mattress, making plans.

For now, the plan looked rather simple: once they were done here, they would move on to the East Coast.

The Chitauri attack had not just been concentrated on the East Coast or New York, but you could call it the epicenter of their onslaught. Tony had been there during the first, unexpected attack, but had watched everything that followed only from the distance through a tv screen.

He had pretty much pushed the fact that hundreds of thousands - no, millions - of people had died to the back of his mind during the last months, but as they were plotting on how exactly to realize their plan, it all came back. It gave his determination more strength, to think that he was not doing this for one person only, even though it had been the best one of them all.

Pepper...

Even though he was active and busy, her image was still burning on the inside of his skull, following him in his dreams. She still was the urge that drove him forward, he was still doing that for her.

Fortunately, Loki kept his mouth shut when he realized Tony's mind wander off, like he could sense where he was in his thoughts. He sure could.

Tony wondered whether Loki did not contemplate what had become of his home, of his loved ones, but then again, the situations were barely comparable.

It was probably the best to stay silent about it and move on – and that was what he did.

After five days, he was done with the right gauntlet.

The fact that he had beaten their deadline by two days, considering the lousy equipment, made him somewhat proud.

Smoothly, his hand disappeared inside the metallic frame which followed his movements when he made a fist with it and then relaxed it again. With his other hand, he pulled up his shirt and took it between his teeth, so that he could connect the gauntlet with the only power-source of use – his Arc reactor.
The low humming sound with which the electricity came to live sent actual chills down his spine and Tony released his shirt again, lips slightly opened in a smile. Just for the sake of it, he made the repulsor lighten up dangerously, close before firing, but only close, enjoying the barely sensible vibrations in his fingers.

God, he had missed this.

„Hey, Snow White, check this out.“

With a swift movement, he swung from his chair and over to Loki, who had settled down in front of the computer screen, busying himself with scrolling through whatever information Jarvis could provide him with. The god turned around, his face attentive, then positively surprised as his eyes dropped to the glowing of the repulsor.

„You are already finished, I see.“

„Want to witness a quick demonstration?“

The repulsors glow brightened up again, emitting the characteristic noise, and Tony could not hold back a grin. This was the first ever success they had so far, he could not think of the last moment he had felt as close to awesome as this.

„I doubt this is a good idea. Remember, they are watching us.“

„Ah, right yeah, I'm being impolite again.“

With this, he turned around to the nearest camera, saluting with his free hand to the invisible spectators. He was not even sure there was somebody checking the surveillance screens, but whatever.

„Of course, you are equally invited to watch what I'm capable of doing in basically no time at all, given the circumstances I'm forced to work under, Mr. Adams.“

Before Loki could utter another concern, Tony whirled around, shooting a repulsor beam in the empty wall on the other side of the hall. There was a loud boom when the concrete burst into debris and dust, not loud enough though to drown Loki's yelled „STARK!“

When the dust was thinning out and revealed the quite impressive hole in the wall, Tony only nodded once, satisfied. Then, he turned around to Loki, the pain in his abdomen once again making itself felt after such a sudden, abrupt movement, although the bruises were already in the stage of a colorful mixture of brown and yellow. The god had buried his face in his hand, obviously anticipating another beat-up for what Tony had done.

„I can not believe you are uncapable of learning from your mistakes, Stark.“

His muttering was barely audible though his hand, yet when he looked up again, he did not look particularly angry or concerned. Even for his composed expression, the green of his eyes was glistening with excitement when he looked over to the smoking hole in the wall.

Tony's mouth twitched into a grin.
„How about you call me Tony?“

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Loki thought he had misheard the very first seconds after Stark had spoken and only slowly, very slowly, the words sank in, unfolding their entire meaning.
Stark wanted him to call him by his forename?
Admittedly, it was common decency in Asgard to call someone by the forename, even if it might be a person who was not a friend, while the surname was barely used, only for introductions and official affairs.
Yet Loki knew that it was different on Midgard, or at least in the part Stark was from, where the surname held much greater importance and was used for most occasions, the forename only reserved for family members and friends.

Stark's offering could therefore only mean one thing.
He wanted to turn their merely work-related agreement to something else, maybe something akin to friendship.
If driven by sheer solitude - solitude only noticed now, after the constant haze of alcohol had vanished - or boredom, or something else Loki did not know; nor did he know if he even wanted to allow such increased - well, how should he call it? - affection towards him.

Yet despite having healed the human the previous day, having woken him from nightmares and having been saved by him at least once, Loki was not inclined to deepen the relationship, knowing how easily it could crumble at every opportunity, making everything worse.
But he also knew that this might be the only offering, the only opportunity to allow something like friendship, and that he could eventually regret his decision later.

And so, despite knowing better, Loki answered:

"Allright, Tony."

Apparently he had hesitated a moment to long, the slightly amused frown from the human at least inclined that, but then, a wide smile spread over his features, a smile free of his usual spleen and the dark look in his eyes.
Calling the human by his forename might have been a good idea after all, Loki thought, as he noticed himself smiling back at the human.

Yet a moment later, his thought were back to their actual business, the smile vanished, and his eyes focused back onto the blackish gauntlet on Tony's hand, instead of his face.

"At least you have something to show, but remember, don't let yourself carried away and try to threaten them, or do something equally foolish...not yet, at least."

Loki had risen from his spot in front of the screen and slowly walked over to the mortal, one long-fingered hand reaching out for the gauntled covering the other's entire lower arm, and tilted it to all sides, taking in the details of the construction.

"It's already impressive, now imagine what it might be capable to do once we add the energy of the Tesseract to it..."

When he looked back up to the human - fingers still holding the gauntlet - he saw something in Tony's face, an almost feral excitement glittering in the dark brown eyes, a confident smirk - Loki found himself staring at the human far longer than he had originally planned, and when he broke the eyes contact, he instantly let go of the gauntlet, and turned around.
"When we're finished with our task, we will be unstoppable."

The words were spoken more into the room than to Tony, but Loki knew that the human had heard it, even if there was no reaction.
And instead of waiting for an answer, the god returned to the computer screen, to keep up the facade of doing the work he had claimed as his in front of Adam's men.
He did not want to give them another reason to attack him, anyhow.

Unfortunately, Tony was not allowed the time to start working on the other gauntlet as well, since barely half an hour later, the screeching of the roll-up door indicated the arrival of somebody.

Tony and Loki exchanged wary looks, both of their bodies immediately tensed at the unexpected visit. This could only mean bad news- it was pretty easy to imagine that Adams would be angered, maybe even alerted because of the hole in a wall.
As quickly as he could without looking nervous, Tony left the couch and walked over to where he had put the gauntlet, while Loki just swung around in his swivel chair, facing the entrance with anticipation.

"Behave yourself, ... Tony."

He did not look at him, but the tone of his voice told enough. He would prefer to avoid having to heal the human another time, he needed the magic energy for other things.
Yet Tony just answered with a sarcastic snort, leaning himself against the table with crossed arms, the gauntlet behind him, to watch a huge white and expensive looking car, followed by another one of those ominous black and even larger cars enter the hall and come to an halt.

Without giving away any emotions in his face, Loki's eyes followed the movements as three of Adams' men - he could never distinguish between these mortals, but he was pretty sure the biggest one was the one who had started the attack a week earlier - jumped from the dark car, unarmed, but still looking like the perfect personifications of a pack of (very well dressed) raiders. They made their way around the white car, just when the back door of it opened and Adams' himself dismounted the machine.

In his sleek suit and well-cut hair, he looked completely unfitting for the surroundings, still, Loki and he knew Tony too, felt a sting of envy for him. They would give a lot right now for a decent shower, a shave (in Tony's case) and haircut, not to think of new clothes.
It was the first time he actually saw the man since their arrival here and he did not know whether it was a good or a bad omen that he had made the effort to arrive personally. In case of doubt, it was always a bad omen.

Tony's mouth twitched in unmasked resentment when Adams shot him an amused smile, examining first him and then Loki from head to toe, obviously pleased by what he found.
However, the smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving the face of their captivator a cold mask.

"You called for me, Stark, so here I am."

With a wide stance, he positioned himself in the middle of the room, his men strategically placed behind him. Loki held his breath, hoping that the mortal would do nothing stupid; he could easily read that Tony had the sudden urge to deny him any answer, since being talked to like that only wakened a defiant anger within him, an anger which would have been all too easily answered with what was waiting behind his back.
Yet, he kept calm – for their both sake.
"Did the results of my presentation meet your standards?"

"Acceptable, even though coming a lot later than anticipated. I want to use it."

Adams skipped every other comment, though this time, Tony held his temper. Only the rapid blinking for a few seconds gave away how uncomfortable he was with the entire idea. After all, it had never been supposed to be like that, Adams should not ever lay one of his filthy hands on the suit, that was what Tony had said.

"If you brought a decent power-supply, go ahead. It stills runs on my reactor.", the mortal tried, quickly glancing over to Loki, who attempted not to look alarmed.

"I don't see why that should be a problem."

Adams answer came with a wide, false smile, and Loki could imagine that the idea was more than amusing for him. Using the reactor as an energy-supplier, invading Tony's personal space and forcing him to watch closely while he fueled his suit with energy from his very chest. The ex-billionaire looked as if it became pretty hard staying calm now.

Tony exhaled deeply, than turned wordlessly around, grabbed the gauntlet and the connecting wires to approach Adams. The two men stood in front of each other for a second and the only way the smaller mortal was able to endure watching the other move his hand inside the metallic frame was most likely the thought that he would never in his life be able to use it outside of this situation. As the grey-haired man observed the gauntlet on his hand, now with unhidden fascination, Tony got rid of his shirt and started to connect his reactor. He refused from saying a word, until Adams looked down on him again, expression smug.

"Somehow I always thought it was just because you'd secretly like to see me naked.", th engineer said dead-pan, not breaking eye-contact.

There was a bit of an offended rustling coming from the bullies in the back, but Adams was not impressed. Loki made a sharp intake of breath, expecting the worst.

"You try hard, Stark, but I can see how this unsettles you and I can not say I'm not enjoying this immensely. So, tell me how to operate it."

Tony had barely finished explaining when the noise and vibrations filled the air for a split-second, then a white-blue beam of light hit the wall. Again, dust, debris and a hole, right beside the one from before and Loki was almost relieved that they would be done now. Yet, Adams did not stop, he just stared at the result and then lifted his palm again, the repulsor rays filling the air several other times, again and again perforating the wall.

There was a disgusting grin playing on Adams' lips, illuminated by the light of the repulsor, and Tony as if he wanted nothing more than to dispose the bastard from the gauntlet as quick as possible, which Loki could understand all to well. It was part of his suit and it was fueled with his life-energy. The god could barely imagine anything more humiliating than someone hostile invading his magic and using it for their own purposes.

Yet all the smaller mortal did was to tense his grip around the shirt in his hand, watching with his lips pressed together how Adams played around with the new power on his hand like it was a toy out of many others.

When he was done, one of his perfectly combed strands of hair hung in his face. He was slightly panting and looked nothing but obnoxious.

"Nice feeling, isn't it?", Tony remarked coldly.
One of the thugs had a coughing-fit because all of the dust and a quick glance over to the wall told enough why: it was pretty much not existing anymore, one could see the soil on several parts of it. Good thing they were underground, otherwise there would be a nice escape route now.

"I could get used to it, yes.", the other replied, watching the gauntlet with a thoughtful expression, then suddenly turned around, the glowing repulsor now directly pointed at Tony's head. Out of reflex, the inventor took a step back, faced with the destructive power of his own creation. Loki shifted in his seat; this was getting out of control.

"Ever stood on the other end of this situation?", Adams asked, laughing at Tony's startled expression, "I could easily kill you now, with the power of the invention that is meant to ensure your very heartbeat."

He laughed again, louder this time, and both Loki and Tony could do nothing than hope the other was reasonable enough not to be satisfied with just one gauntlet and a corpse. He god noticed Tony blinking, the light from the repulsor seemed to be blinding.

"I really think this is ridiculously funny - isn't it, guys?"

There came some approving laughter from the three men and Loki knew that he had to intervene sooner or later, if the whole affair would continue to develop like that, it was getting to dangerous and he could not risk losing Tony to a sudden outburst of some hostile Midgardians. Yet he stayed put, observing the situation further.

"Don't tell me you're satisfied with just one gauntlet."

The other, who had turned towards his men for a few seconds to wallow in their admiration, focused on his captive again, his laughter disappearing immediately.

"No, it would be a shame to lose you before you're done. Stand comfortable, Stark, no need to be so jumpy. We're old friends after all, aren't we?"

Too late the god noticed the reference. A second later, Adams had turned to Loki, his voice now raised to sound intimidating, the repulsor aimed at the god on his chair.

"YOU, on the other hand, are not an old friend of mine, nor do I actually believe you are an old friend of him. What on earth do you have to do with all of this?"

Loki stayed perfectly calm on the outside, his eyes focused on the light of the repulsor, contrary to Stark without having to blink, but still tense. Because one thing was sure: there was no sign of hesitation in Adams' eyes and no reason that he would not try to end Loki's life, just to make a point.

"I watch you the whole time, I can not figure out the input you have. What is your purpose here and what are you two plotting? Tell me, come on, if you enjoy life. I said you fucking TELL ME!"

The god did not like how everything had went out of control in such a short amount of time, not at all, and now, with the focus of the entire room on him, he was actually at a loss of what to do. He could tell his previous lie, that he had developed Stark's software for years, but that explanation was more than insufficient, Loki knew that, and Adams would know that too. And even if the man did not further inspect on that issue, there was still another, much more important part of the explanation missing.
Why did he accompany Stark?

And no matter how Loki twisted and turned it, there was no answer to this question that would not sound suspicious, like a cheap lie or a threat. But he had to answer.

The god slowly rose from his chair, the sitting and lower position suddenly feeling wrong, way to wrong, and positioned himself in front of Adams, answering: "I already told your men, I'm here to write the software for Stark, but the greatest part of this is done when the main part of the suit are already assembled."

He god hoped that the mortal would let the issue be, as small as the possibility was, but of course Adams was far from being satisfied by that lame of excuse of an answer.

Slowly, Adams took his hand down and together with it, the glow and the hum of the repulsor died down. Still, judging from the way he squinted his eyes, as if he could not really believe anybody would lie so blatantly in his face, was everything else than relaxing.

"You're a smart one, aren't you? Thinking you can fuck with me."

"Yeah, but he actually is-"

"Shut the fuck up, Stark, nobody is interested in what you have to say!!"

The second Adam's had stepped forward, Tony already stopped again, effectively silenced by the threatening glow of the gauntlet. The other had already turned his attention towards Loki again, obviously following an already thought-through plan, although it still was lying in the dark what this plan might include. He was taking a few steps closer to the god, whose look was unfaltering, a snide smile playing in the corners of his lips.

"So, if you're so smart, then explain to me if I got you right: You lie to me about your purpose here - probably your whole identity - , you make fun of me, thinking I would not see through this and then you still believe I will let you stay here, unharmed, undisturbed, do whatever it is you do behind my back?"

It was clear that Loki would not answer that question - there was no answer which would help deescalate the situation. The god only swallowed once, meeting Adams eyes, still towering above him.

Then, the second Adams lifted his hand again, Tony did the only thing that seemed resonable right now. With a low 'click', he capped the connection between the reactor and the gauntlet, making the whole thing die down on Adams' hand immediately. There was silence first, then the other's eyes met the ones of the inventor, furious anger burning in them.

"You're really begging for it, don't you?", the man hissed, then everything moved way too fast for the Midgardian to react properly: A gesture with Adams' hand and the smaller man's arms were bent behind his back in a painful angle, pressed against his back and rendering him unable to move by one of the thugs, simultaneously several guns appeared out of nowhere, then the gauntlet changed holders and landed in the other guy's hands, so that Adams was now once again armed, pointing his gun at Loki's forehead.

"Now that we can be sure there will be no more unqualified remarks from the side, I ask you again,
and only you: What is it you're planning?", Adams's voice was a low, threatening hiss, the metal of the gun pressing harder against Loki's head.

"What I do with you depends on your answer. I will let you stay, if you just say the right thing."

Loki knew that he had hit a dead end, there was no possible answer that would not lead to him being injured in any way, the only influence he had now was how severe said injuries would be.

"Stark needs me, and he won't continue to work without me."

He was playing a dangerous game right now, a game that could easily get both of them killed - or force Loki to kill Adams and his men first, which would result in an almost total failure of their plan - but it was the best, most honest and yet vaguest answer he could give.

"And what does Stark need you for? To stick his cock into something warm?"

Snickering from the men behind.

And Loki did not answer, there was nothing to say anymore.

"Okay, Stark needs you. Anyway, I'm sure you can understand my point if I say that I can't let you be like this, without knowing what you two little fuckers are up to. Only precautions, we don't want anyone to dance out of the line, right, Stark?"

The last words were directed at Tony, who was still fixed on the ground by one of the bulky men, while the four remaining ones slowly came closer, like hungry predators sneaking up on their prey.

Loki did not fight them, when they were suddenly onto him, pressing him down the same way they had done it with Stark, his arms painfully twisted behind his back.

Something was firmly strung around his right thigh, firm enough to block any flow of blood into the lower part of the leg, while his the sleeve of his jeans was pushed upwards, revealing the bare ankle beneath the black fabric.

The god was confused at first, having expected a different kind of threatment, but then it slowly damned to him what they were going to do.

The decision had to be made now.

Fight the men off and kill them, to spare himself the humiliation and the pain, or endure the treatment, for the sake of his and Tony's plan.

And in the end, Loki decided for the later; they had gone through enough to reach this point, and their plan had not to fail through him, because he could not endure a bit of pain.

The god still struggled when his head was pressed down onto the cold and dirty concrete ground, but it was nothing but a show, the display of a terrified mortal - as much as Loki could endure to act like one without entirely losing his dingity-, expecting torture and death.

Loki did not see what was happening behind him, nor did he see what kind of tool they had just removed from the back of the van; he only knew that it was going to hurt.

It was only seconds later when Loki heard the noise of a heavy metallic tool cutting through the air, followed by the noise of metall meeting flesh.

Hot and searing pain shoot up from the spot where the sharp object had cut into his ankle and sliced through skin, the thick sinews and kept sticking in the outer layer of the bone. Yet he did not scream, he would not give Adams this satisfaction, only firmly clenched his teeth and clawed his hands into the concrete ground, trying to shut out the pain shooting up from his damaged leg.

"Now look at that, the blade simply got stuck in the bone. Haven't seen this before.", one of Adams' nameless men said, as if they were talking about nothing else than interesting cloud formations,
then the weapon was torn out of the bone with a sickening crunching noise. 

"Let me try."

Through the haze of pain Loki remembered the voice as the one that belonged to the man who had attacked Stark last time, and who now held some sharp tool in his hand, ready to slice it into Loki's flesh. 

Then, the blade hit another time, again sticking into the bone, was torn out another time to just hit again. 

It took eleven hits until the stubborn bone was sliced through, and a twelfth, to finally separate the foot from the rest of the body. 

Loki had not made a single noise through the entire procedure. 

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It was useless to avert your gaze or close your eyes, because it was impossible to block out the sickening noise of breaking bones. 

Through the entire procedure, Tony was held down by one of Adam's men, whose heavy breathing he could hear above his head which indicated that he, in contrast to Tony, was indeed watching - watching with pleasure. 

Even though he had seen pretty much already during the last weeks, the inventor's stomach turned at these noises and at the gruesome pictures which came up in his head without his wishing. All he could think of was that this was not anybody who had his foot cut off with a fucking cleaver, but that this was Loki, that he was a god, that he had lived through the most lethal infection anyone could imagine in a matter of days and that he would be able to somehow endure this as well. 

Still, for Fuck's sake, they were cutting off his fucking foot - just like that! 

Yes, Loki might be fucking badass and an Aesir god and all, but he had just lost a foot - you did not simply grow back a missing limb. They were fucked, doomed, how should he fight properly with just one leg of use? It was just a second, but Tony could feel their whole plan crumble and eventually break down completely. 

He had to stop thinking like that he had to concentrate on what was still to save. 

Tony wished he might just vomit, he really felt like it, but he didn't. 

He just averted his gaze, frantically focusing on some crack in the floor, on the pain in his shoulders, on his own rapid heartbeat - on anything than what happened just there in front of his eyes. It was completely incomprehensible on any level to him how Loki did not make one sound, but if he had, Tony would have not been able to lay still any longer. 

The urge to stop this cruelty, this unnecessary display of sadism, was maddening, because he was so utterly powerless right now. Even if he would have been able to free himself, it would have only made everything worse. 

So, he was condemned to wait until it was over, to simply let it happen. 

God, he was so sick of it, he could not stand it another time, and another. He had had his share of watching somebody important getting hurt right in front of his eyes. 

Eventually, with a disgusting thud, something hit the ground, then there was venomous laughter. Tony dared to look up again, suddenly drawn to the whole scene, unable to look away any longer. 

There was blood on the floor, a lot of it, gushing red oozing out of the stump where a few moments ago had been Loki's food. The particular limb had been carelessly dropped at the side of Loki's head, but the god was not looking at it. Tony could not see his face, there were too much of his
messy black strands of hair, but right now, he was not even sure whether he wanted to see that face.
What he could see and what was even worse was the satisfied look in Adam's eyes, the way his whole posture had automatically straightened like he was actually proud on the sheer amount of madness he had to come up with to do something like that.

"I'm sure I made my point clear now, haven't I?", the man asked to no one in particular, his eyes still greedily feasting on the mess his men had made, before his grin eventually froze. Another expression emerged, something akin to disgust, as if he had suddenly realized that this bloody procedure was actually under his level, simply not his style, and with a quick wave of his hand, he ordered his men back to the van.

Tony felt the weight leave from his back, then all of the thugs slowly left. One of them insisted on giving the pale, unrealistic looking foot a kick, but the others did not laugh about it any longer. Their boss had said their job was done, and so they were done here now. Time for lunch.

The genius barely held back any longer, but he had to, he had to keep his mouth shut until it was safe to look after Loki. The god was not moving, but he could see his breathing by the unsteady expansion of his ribcage. Shit. Maybe he could bleed to death. Maybe Adams had gone too far. Even though he knew these thoughts weren't leading anywhere, they kept bombarding him. Just when he had pushed himself up on his knees again, his concerned gaze never leaving Loki's body - although intentionally leaving out the bloody stump - Adams turned towards him.

"You know what I wonder, Stark?", the wonder in Adams voice was so fake it hurt to listen, "I wonder if I should worry that he'll probably bleed to death. That maybe I'll get a suit without functioning software - but somehow, I feel myself at a lack of care. Funny, isn't it?"

"Don't you see me laughing?", Tony answered with a weary grin. These games never had results other than blood, way too much blood.

"I want my suit and I will get it. So, look after your old friend, before it's too late."

With these words, Adams turned on his heel, not sparing Loki or Tony another glance. The van was already leaving with screeching tires, but Tony did not watch long enough to see the Bentley leave, too. He was at Loki's side a second later, just when the god started moving on his own volition again, slowly rolling around on his back with a low, pained moan.

"Tell me you're not going to die from this."

"No."

Tony escaped a relieved groan.

"Oh, thank GOD. 'Kay, you're conscious, so, I'm getting one of the cables to stop the bleeding.", he listed the steps of his emergency plan in his head, rising from his kneeling position at Loki's side, just to accidentally step in the pile of blood. He cursed, louder than necessary.

"Fuck, this is so gross... shit, shit, shit..."

Loki would have almost considered it cute how concerned the human cared about him, running around the workshop like a scared bird.
Truth be told, it was a great wound, lethal for a mortal if not properly treated and the amount of blood on the floor did not look that decorative. But he was a god and even more importantly, a shapeshifter.
The pain from the stumb with the missing foot was immense, yet nothing he could not endure and out of some sudden notion, Loki started to chuckle, lowly at first, until it grew to a full, drawn-out laughter.

"The effort they made themselves with these action is really amusing, but I fear all of it might have been for vain. Stop looking for a cable, Tony, it's not necessary."

Tony, halfway through the room, stopped in his movement and turned around wiht a frown, actually looking worse than Loki felt. He really seemed to be concerned about him and it gave the god a certain security, to know that there was someone to care for him.
His teeth-baring grin changed into a more subtle and inviting smile.

"Come over here, I will show you something I promise you haven't seen in your life before.", the god said, while removing the strap tightly bound around his right right. He tossed the item carelessly away and watched with a satisfied smirk how Tony came closer, his eyes locked onto Loki's in an attempt to avoid looking at the wound.

"You better have a good explanation for taking off the strap, other than trying to kill yourself.", the pale looking human mumbled while he sat down beside the god, twisting his face in disgust when said god sat up and moved around to give a better view on the wound.

"Shit, doesn't that hurt? Oh god, this is so disgusting, whatever you're going to do, don't make me watch it."

"Don't make such a fuss, the other wound on my abdomen was much worse than this one and you still took care of it. I had injuries far more severe than this one, but I'm sure you don't want to miss that."

With that, the magic collected in Loki's body shoot down his leg, gathering at the bleeding end. For a few seconds nothing happened, then the flesh and bone began to shift, expanded, forming new cells.
The splintered and marrow-leaking bone was the first part to heal, and from it, the several smaller bones of the foot extended, instantly covered by fresh muscle tissue, sinews and pale skin. The long white structures of the midfoot spread out, finally leading to the tinier ones of the toes and the complex arrangement of tendons around the small joints.
In less than a minute, there was no indication that there had ever been a wound (except for the blood and chopped off foot on the floor) and Loki tentatively moved his new toes, stretching them and circling his ankle.
Everything seemed to be the way it was supposed to be.

"It needs a lot more than a mortal blade to cause me real harm. I had to weaken the tissue, otherwise they could never have caused more than a scratch on my skin.", Loki commented with a grin, his long fingers ghosting over the white and flawless skin of his regrown limb.

Tony, who had hunkered down at Loki's side, unable to look away once the process of regrowth had started despite his assertions, decided that this was fascinating enough to sit down completely. He chuckled, masking his disbelief, but still observed the perfect new limb with awe. All the small details, the fine veins, the smooth pale skin - nothing differed from before.
It was pretty disillusioning to witness Loki pulling a stunt like that with minimal effort, considering the fact that ordinary scientists still celebrated every piece of grown tissue in a Petri dish like they had found out to play god.

"Nice one.", he merely commented, keeping all the other thoughts for himself, "I can't really judge any longer from which moment I actually have to be concerned about your health."
This made the god laugh again, but Tony really did not find it funny. After all, he had seen the other at the edge of surrender to his injuries, he knew that it was possible - even though Loki seemed to have found enough of his former confidence again to shrug that off like it was nothing of a true god's concern.

Yet, Tony was dependent on his health - he was dependent on his magic.

"It is a truly amusing image, a mortal concerned about my health. I will let you know, if that makes you sleep better. Yet, I have regained enough magic to be sure it won't happen too soon."

"Too kind."

All the nervous concern from before was completely vanished by now. With Loki being able to do something like this, their outlook on the future seemed a lot brighter than before - they just had to make sure nobody knew of that before they could allow themselves to be discovered.

"You know you have to fake a convincing limp for the cameras now? The show must go on."

"There is no difficulty in that.", Loki answered with a knowing smile.

Tony just cocked his eyebrow at him, but somehow he did not even want to know any more. The more of the trickster's magic returned, the harder it became to predict what he was about to do.

"I'll start you off with your acting career. Give me your arm."

He laid Loki's arm around his neck and pulled the god up from the floor. Together, they managed to make it look like it was an actual struggle to walk towards the mattress and lie Loki down there again, but what the cameras could not see was the satisfied grin playing on Loki's lips, a grin that was somehow contagious. When Tony looked down to catch another look on the new foot again, there was none. He needed only a split-second to deduct that there was again magic playing a major role, so he just marked it as 'too fucked up to care about' and left Loki alone again.

They were kind of companions now, but it still bothered Tony that their power-balance at the moment was definitely weighed in Loki's direction. He needed to get working again. He needed his suit, his whole suit, because he could not stand to be a powerless watcher another time. He needed, really needed, like he would have needed a strong drink right now, to smash Adam's ugly face in.

With a swift movement, he turned around to collect the gauntlet, which was lying somewhere across the room on the floor. It nearly was as disturbing to see like that as was the actual limp lying only a few feet further. It was not damaged, though, and he brought it back to the desk where it belonged, then brought himself to take a plastic back and let the isolated food disappear inside. The blood-piles on the floor could not as easily be removed, so they probably had to wait until they dried from themselves.

When he had splashed a bit of water in his face, he turned to Loki again, who was still lying on the mattress, watching him.

"Suppose it's probably suspicious if I'll head to the work-bench immediately.", he pondered out loud, walking over to the god, "so you might as well tell me what exactly it is you do there. Gives our friends behind the monitors the idea that we're spending some quality time."

Loki smiled at Stark's suggestion, happy to have some knowledge he could share the mortal, which made him feel less a useless addition to the furniture.

"I did it through shapeshifting."

He only earned a confused frown for that explanation - not that Loki had expected something else
and eager to give the human further insight into the unique working of his magic, he continued:

"Healing spells – like the one I used on you a few days ago – work differently than the shapeshifting. They draw energy from a source, maybe the body of a magic-wielder, a potion or a healing stone, to speed up the natural healing process. It is possible to save one's life with that and bypass weeks, in case of mortals months or even years of healing process. But even the most advanced sorcerer isn't able to avoid scars with that procedure, neither is it possible to recreate what has been lost with such a spell."

Stark nodded, apparently grasping the concept of Loki's words, but it would have been strange if he didn't.

"Shapeshifting is different, and only few know that it can be used for the means of a far more effective regeneration, beside disguising your form. Shapeshifting allows you to change into bodies far bigger or smaller than your own, which also comes with the ability to expand, replace or regrow every part of it, limbs, organs, skin...everything beside the brain. That's why I don't have scars."

To prove his point, Loki lifted hoodie and shirt, showing the flawless skin of his abdomen where two weeks prior had been an oozing red gash.

"You know that scientists would kill to get a sample of your cells?...wait...how can I be sure that this is what you really look like if you can change just like that?"

"I'm not really looking like this."

The words were out of Loki's mouth before he had properly thought about them and now he desperately wished to take them back, because he knew that the sudden curiosity he saw in Stark's face was nothing he could fob off just like that.

"Then show me what you're really looking like."

"No."

"First you tell me and now you don't want to show? Come on, you've already seen me making a fool out of myself with that booze, that can't be worse."

"I said no, Stark, I won't show you."

The use of his surname seemed to have the desired effect on Tony, making him know that he was close from going to far, and his mouth closed, leaving the two of them in silence.

Apparently, he had hit a sensitive spot there. Not that it was surprising finding one in Loki, he was sure there were plenty, but he was still a bit surprised by the wall he seemed to have encountered here. Even though he did not go on for now, he kept that in the back of his head - now he needed to know, just to have his curiosity pleased.

Well, he probably would find out sooner or later - they would be screwing around together a little longer as it looked like.

"So, you're actually lying to me the whole time, but that would be nothing new, wouldn't it.", he declared, letting it sound casual. It might feel like shit, but it really was good to be reminded from time to time that Loki was, after all, a person he barely knew. He should not allow himself to get off guard with him, just because they were fighting on the same side at the moment. There were secrets kept untold which could always turn against one, so better leave it be.
"I suppose you need some rest, after all the blood-loss and the traumatic events from before.", he said eventually with a sarcastic undertone, patting the god on his arm, a gesture meant for the cameras only.

With that, he removed himself from the mattress, not without giving the blinking red light of the surveillance camera above their heads the finger.

He pretended it did not bother him that much, but Adam's performance had had quite an impact on him. Not that he was scared of the man or his bloodthirsty lapdogs or anything - it took a lot more to scare him. He had forbidden himself any sign of fear for the work he would do with Loki, even if the bloody stump had looked revolting and the light of the repulsor blinding him had been a sight he had never wanted to witness.

The thing was: the more he went into this whole thing, the more he put his head above the parapet, he felt that he was not ready for its consequences. He might be determined, he might be high-performance in his head again, but if there had been a fight, he was pretty sure Loki's chance of survival would have surpassed his own in a critical degree.

It had took some time, but Tony Stark was back at the point where he could not stand it to be second best.

During the next days, he was finishing the second gauntlet. It felt like it was building itself, taking him barely the same time he had needed for the first one. Yet, it did not mean that he spent the rest of his time being idle. There was no equipment here to serve him in that purpose, so he had to help himself, but after months of almost no activity, it was hard to get in his rhythm again.

When Loki first found him doing pushups, it was three days after Adams had visited them last time and deep night. The small corner he was in barely lit by one of the lamps. Of course he could not work out in the daytime, the cameras would film it and he they would get a friendly visitor again, presenting them a friendly asskick. You did not need to be physically fit to build weapons, you needed to be physically fit to fight back.

"When I heard you panting, I thought you were doing something else.", the god said with a small grin, leaning against the workdesk, watching Tony.

"Yeah? Like what?", Tony asked between two breaths, deliberately playing dumb, not interrupting his inner counting. His back and arms hurt like hell, but now he certainly would not stop.

"Having dreams.", Loki answered, the cunning smile not fading.

Tony did not answer him, just kept his pace. He had put away his t-shirt, since he only had that one and a hoodie and he was not fond of saturating it with sweat and then wearing it the next weeks. The glow of the reactor illuminated the floor beneath him every time he went down. When he reached 100 in his head, he stopped, then sat back, loosening his back muscles a bit.

"If you work in the daytime and now do this in the nighttime, when will you be sleeping? I thought you mortals are dependent on a certain amount of it, otherwise you go mad."

Tony just grinned at him.

"Why waste precious time? It's enough to become mad just being trapped in here."

With these words, he was on the floor again, this time with his back, inhaling deeply once before he started the other 100 of sit-ups. He did not really care whether Loki was watching him or what
he was thinking, but the presence of the god spurred his determination.

Loki watched the mortal absentmindedly for a few moments, caught in his own thoughts and the monotonous and always repeating movements in front of him. Then he sat down beside the mortal (of course putting up a show by not using his right leg and instead supported himself on a nearby wall), his green eyes wandering over the moving body.

"Thor used to do this for hours when we were younger and sometimes, I sat on his back, reading a book until he was finished."

Loki had no idea where this sudden urge to share this information had come from, but it had somehow popped into his mind and demanded to be told. And why not, it was a fond memory of a time he had been truly happy. It had just been the time when he had turned old enough to go on adventures with Thor and his friends, and despite being the youngest in the group and not always accepted by the Warriors Three and Sif, it had been a time full of new experiences. He had often wished to turn back into his more naive and optimistic younger self. Life had been easier back then.

But right now, his life was nothing but a wild ride, rapidly changing between utter boredom, nightmares and ferocious battles. And right now, he had no one except for Tony and with the constant threat of death hanging over the two of them, he saw no reason not to enjoy what he had as much as possible.

"Cute.", Tony just pressed out between clenched teeth. Right now, he was not really in the condition to appreciate the small amount of personal information the god provided him with. So, he just went on, monotonously doing his training, until he had reached 100 again and let himself sink to the floor. He was heavily panting, but his aching muscles felt wonderful like that.

Loki was still silent, obviously somewhere lost in his fond memories of his youth or whatever nostalgic nonsense he could come up with. Tony lied still for a few moments, relaxing a bit with closed eyes, listening to the silence around, to the low hum of the machines and the dripping noise of the leaking faucet. He wondered whether it might be a good moment now to engage in some a bit less superficial conversation about Loki's relationship with Thor - this was still a topic he had, despite the numerous SHIELD-files he had read about it, no clue about - but he lacked the motivation to actually try now. Just when he decided to call it a night now, Loki talked again.

"Tony."

The way he said his name was odd. Like he was just returning from far away, like what would be following was something of extraordinary importance and as if he had thought a long time about how he should articulate his next words. Even though he did not know what it would be, Tony's pulse quickened. He opened his eyes, turning to Loki again. Their gazes met, but the god still seemed pondering about what he would say next. Tony sat up and rearranged his hair, waiting patiently.

"Despite the exertions, I finally have regained most of my magic. 2 or 3 days and I will be able to summon the Tesseract."

The silence deepened for a second around them, Tony swallowed dryly. The whole time, their work had been leading to this, to the key-part of their plan, to their only chance to use the core of the disaster for its cure. Now, when it became real, accessible, Tony felt a
bit overwhelmed. Actually, they were even right on schedule, still it seemed much too early. He had not even finished a whole suit. They would need to improvise and he would need to work faster, much faster, because with the Tesseract here, in their dimension, in this very room, they would be targets soon enough.

Nevertheless, a smile crept on Tony's lips, full of vengeful anticipation.

"We better prepare to give the lady a decent welcome, then."

Chapter End Notes

Huh yes, Loki can regrow his limbs. It's a headcanon I had for a while longer now and I'm kind of happy to had a chance to work the idea in somewhere. If shapeshifting is regarded on a cellular basis, it seems quite obvious to me that it would not only provide the ability to change the body, or parts of it; but also enable some kind of superior regeneration.

This is the last chapter for the next two weeks, since me and my friend will both be off to Greece tomorrow (lot's of offline RPing on collegeblocks at the beach, yaaaaay), so there won't be any chance that this story is continued during this time. But as far as I know there will be Wifi, so I will read and answer every single comment (or do that once I'm back).

I hope you enjoy this chapter <3
Summoning

Chapter Summary

The Tesseract is retrieved from the dimensional fold, and things are set to work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Why do we have to do it here? Isn't that kind of unworthy, you know, for the Tesseract?"

"We have to think efficiently now, I want to use as little of my magic as possible. If we do it here, I merely have to keep up the illusions and don't have to waste energy on an invisibility spell."

Tony made a displeased grunt at that, but did not object further, to Loki's relief. The two illusions of them in the other room – Tony on the work desk, fiddling with some wires, and Loki on the computer – did not require much of his magic, nor did they lessen his concentration.

However, with each additional spell, as trivial as one shielding them from the eyes of the cameras, was an additional effort and therefore an additional risk.

The god had no idea what the summoning of the Tesseract would bring along. He hoped for the best scenario, that is to say that nothing would happen.

Yet, all kinds of things could occur: SHIELD could possibly track them through the cube's energy signature or, even worse, the Chitauri could get back on his trail and the whole tiresome run would start again - only that Loki doubted he could survive it another time.

So, the god had planned to cast another spell over the cube once it was summoned, one that would keep its energy within a range of a few feet. It would help to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Still, he was thrifty about his magic for now, the greatest part of it held back with the intention to have something at his avail should things turn out the nasty way.

You could never be cautious enough, having now three parties out there, lusting for their blood.

The dirty tiles of the bathroom floor felt cold under Loki's feet as he shifted his position. He was a little on edge, now that he was so close to retrieve the Tesseract from the dimensional fold.

His nervousness and suppressed concerns could easily be interpreted as anticipation, but he was not even trying to hide it.

Tony was looking at him expectantly and the god knew that there was no point for a further delay.

Loki gathered his magic, focusing it on one point within his body before he let the strands of invisible energy reach between the layers of dimensions. The magic shifted, searching for the exact spot where the Tesseract had been hidden, a place where only Loki could retrieve it from.

Then, finally, his magic found the cube and energy met energy.

There was an electric noise, a buzz of static discharge and the sounds of something ripping, when the dimensional fold was torn open, illuminating the whole room with a white flash for barely a second. As fast as it had come, the white light vanished, only to make room for an intense blue glow, cold and burning hot from cosmic fire at the same time.
The Tesseract.

It was odd:
Loki could feel the energy of the cube prickling on his skin, felt resistance when he moved his fingers around the geometric object, but at the same time, the Tesseract seemed to be entirely weightless, as if not there at all.
Yet, it was undeniable. There it was, firmly resting in Loki's hand – all that power literally on the tip of his fingers and at the same time, it could have been at the other end of the universe.

"Beautiful, isn't she?", Loki commented, his gaze caught in the endless blue of the cube. It always had a mesmerizing effect on him

"If you're about to lick it again, I will refuse to work with it.", Tony commented dryly, nevertheless his gaze was in the same way caught as Loki's was.

It seemed unfitting to have such an unbelievable source of limitless power right in front of your eyes, here, in a dirty bathroom.
Loki knew that Tony had seen the Tesseract often enough and there was unhidden curiosity visible in his eyes. The mortal had never been in direct contact with her and could probably merely estimate whether she felt hot or cold, light or heavy. As he had seen other mortals work with her, he knew they all lived with an almost primal instinct of fear that forbade touching the cube with bare hands.
Apparently, Tony had overcome said instinct long ago.

"You mind?", he asked Loki, interrupting the god's mesmerized stare.

One hand extended, Tony looked at him with a questioning expression. With slow, incredibly slow movements, Loki turned towards him and placed the cube in the palm of his hand. Even though he did it without hesitation, it was only reluctantly and he could not keep a skeptical twitch from his mouth.
It was hard to let go of the valuable cube, even for a short time.

"Interesting."

It was the only comment Tony eventually gave, then made a few steps towards the door. A sudden rush of distress raced through him, then Loki was in front of him immediately, blocking the way with his body, the urge to protect stronger than his rational mind.
Tony raised his eyebrows, then lifted a hand in a defensive gesture.

"Easy there, Gollum. Nobody about to steal your precious."

The engineer gave the god a reassuring smile.

"This is about trust right? So, you trust me that she's in good hands. The best hands, actually. I just need to check for compatibility, as a starter, so you might call back the illusions."

"I believe I should, yes."

Loki's answer came out only hesitantly. He knew his behavior to be unnecessary, foolish and exaggerated, yet the Tesseract, until now safely hidden by his magic, was now apart from him. The feeling itself was hard to digest, he would need some time again to get used to it.
After a second, he quickly returned the smile.

"I will shield her from the camera's eye. Yet, you have to be careful, Tony, remember that"
"Discretion' is my middle name, snowflake.", Tony grinned, "Oh, wait, no, that's Edward."

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Tony heard Loki follow him out of the bathroom. Despite the smile, he still seemed a bit at unease, yet now he was busied by weaving spells around the Tesseract to keep her hidden. Meanwhile, Tony was arranging everything he had prepared the previous days.

The machines were only rudimentary and mere prototypes to take measures which should later be used to create energy storage devices that would be powered by the Tesseract and later be integrated into every single part of the suit. This would have two advantages: One was that the multiplied energy from several of this storage devices would increase the suits energy more than the sevenfold - if the equations were right which they always were - and the other was that there would no longer be the need to draw energy from the arc reactor. He had told Loki all of this, but the god still did not know (or, for the record, had never asked) anything about the arc reactor.

"Careful.", the god commented, heavily leaning against the desk to keep up his facade of a cripple.

"No need to be scared, snowflake. I know what I'm doing."

His response was only a quiet mutter as he was just adjusting the self-made sensors which needed some concentration (they looked more like glued together scrap metal than anything else, but Tony knew they were working). Then, after a last check, he set the machines on work, then rushed over to the computer to observe the incoming data.

Loki followed limping and looked over the his shoulder.

"Anything worthwhile?"

Tony grunted, not satisfied.

"Nothing we didn't know yet. Self-sustaining energy source, some kind of plasma... my dad already experimented a little bit with it and the outcome was that-", he tapped his finger on the glass of his reactor, "...but right now I'm at a loss of how to produce something that might be able to store the energy. Maybe..."

His voice trailed off as his eyes went glassy staring on the screen, when he lost himself in his own thoughts. Absentmindedly, he was faintly chewing on his thumb, the only movement in his face.

"You said that the device in your chest is based on the Tesseract. I could take a look at it, maybe I could gather some information..."

The suggestion tore Tony out of his spiraling thoughts and the dreamy look disappeared from his face.

Loki fumbling about with his reactor? Now it was Tony's turn to get suspicious. He knew, he probably should not, since it could bring them useful information, but the thought did not appeal to him, not the tiniest bit. Quickly, he shook his head.

"No, no. I remember a time where you plus touching my reactor meant being thrown out of a window. So, for obvious reasons, no."

Loki's well-audible sigh was probably meant to tell him that he was being stupid, so Tony turned
around to the screens, as if their useless information would unveil the key to their problem if he just studied it long enough.

"Who was it using big words like 'trust' with such self-confidence only minutes ago?", the god asked, a bit of mockery lying in the undertone of his voice. Tony would have wished him to just leave the topic be, like he had left the god alone when he had shown his unwillingness to talk about his 'true form' - whatever that had meant - but seemingly, he was not granted to appreciate that pleasure as well.

"Don't know that guy."

"What does it do, anyway? You never told me."

The inventor turned to face Loki again, expression serious, yet a bit annoyed. He had had this talk hundreds of times in his life. Although it became kind of tiring after some time, it was every time equally unpleasant. He actually was almost surprised Loki did not have an idea yet and if so, even more that he had held his curiosity in check and had not asked until now. Tony certainly would have at the first opportunity. Yet, he would have to deal with the shortest summary.

"It's keeping me alive. There are metallic shrapnel in my heart which would wander, destroy tissue and, after a few hours, kill me if not for the electro magnet. Don't ask for the whole story, Jarvis can give you the newspaper articles if you like."

There was a short silence in which Tony studied Loki's features in every detail, yet he could not find anything in them which would give away anything other than honest surprise and, after that, curiosity. That was the better kind of reaction - often it was nothing but badly masked aversion. Still, he would like to avoid the topic for now. They may be companions now, but that did not mean it was time to dig deep in past wounds.

"This sounds like an interesting story, though.", Loki broached the subject again, "I would love to have a look at it. I promise not to do any damage - as you should expect from me now, anyway. I saved your life and health multiple times, Tony."

The inventor pressed his lips together, thinking. A quick glance on the screen gave no new information and another look in Loki's face only told him that he actually was acting stupid right now.

From one second to another, he changed his mind. With a slight eye-roll Tony gave in, then got rid of his t-shirt in a few swift movements, freed the desk from some heaps of papers and hopped on it so that his chest was a bit more at eye-level for Loki.

For his own good, the god abstained from any comment and just stepped closer to Tony. Now that he had permission, his gaze curiously traveled over the engineer's chest, then stuck to the intense blue of the reactor. Tony just let him do, yet did not take his eyes off him the whole time.

The trickster was close now, the slender fingers of his right hand encircling the metallic frame of the reactor thoughtfully before they eventually ran over the glass-surface. Tony felt nothing like the tickling feeling the healing-spell had caused, but he was not sure if that meant that Loki was not already using magic. Perhaps it was just absorbed again by the reactor's energy, like it had been with the Chitauri scepter.

Both men had fallen in a mutual silence, like the sudden closeness demanded them to be quiet. Tony could feel the other's breath ghosting over the skin on his neck and collarbone and when he
looked up, Loki's face was nothing but inches away. He swallowed, observing the by this time almost familiar features for a while, before he deliberately averted his gaze and stared to the side, at the wall.

"And, does it speak to you?"
"Not yet."
Loki's eyes were fixed on the glowing blue construction in front of him. Apparently, he had not done anything yet, only taken in the reactor's appearance with his eyes, no magic involved. Tony's body shuddered when Loki accidentally brushed him with his hand – the other's skin felt like ice on his chest, sending goosebumps all over his body.

"Could feel a little strange now.", the god warned and Tony closed his eyes. Now he felt it again, something entering him, like a warm liquid running right through the tissue surrounding the reactor, the cut off bones, a missing part of muscle, his heart with it's fastening pace...

Suddenly, his eyes opened again and his hand shot upwards, grabbing Loki's wrist and holding it in a tight grip, his whole body strangely tensed, in a state of heightened alarm.

The way Loki's magic had seeped through his chest, the barely noticeable disturbances in the regular hum of the reactor, the way he had felt that strange, external force explore the vulnerability of his heart had been too much.
It had not hurt, though, he did not even feel threatened - it was just a reflex.

"Sorry.", he mouthed after a few moments of silence, when Loki's confused stare told him that he should probably talk again.

His heart was beating rapidly now and he knew that Loki could feel it, even without his magic he should be able to feel it. A few moments too late Tony realized that he was still holding Loki's wrist and when he suddenly let go of it, he did not even know whether he wanted the other to stop or not.
It just felt so strange to him to have Loki so close, not just close but somehow inside the core of his being, that it had confounded him in a way he could not quite grasp.

"Shall I stop?"

"No, no.", Tony shook his head, now determined to shrug off the sudden awkwardness, "Just... tell me what you see. It's kind of... unsettling when I can feel you're in there and don't know what you do."

He scratched the back of his head, shifted a bit on the desk and then sat straight again. Taking breath in and then exhaling deeply, he looked up to meet Loki's slightly concerned look and then nodded encouragingly.

The god just laid his hand back on his bare chest, making Tony shiver, but this time it was merely from the coldness of his fingers.

Again, the magic seeped through the reactor and the tissue surrounding it and the inventor could feel his throat tighten, but now he refused to fight it. It went against any natural instinct, but he had said yes to this, so he had to live through it now.

„I can see the shrapnel you mentioned, so small, yet so dangerous for a mortal heart. I could tell you exactly where, but you probably know already."

Loki's talking had the desired effect and succeeded to soothe Tony. Despite the contact they had had before, all those times they had dealt with each other's injuries and illnesses and had been physical with each other, this was the closest Loki had been to him since
they started their trip.  
In fact, this was the closest anyone had been to him for months, except for Steve perhaps.

Together with the continuous low talking, he slowly found the touch to actually feel pleasant.

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Loki did not hesitate any longer and sent his magic on another exploration, intending to end the procedure as fast as possible.

Tony seemed to have relaxed under him, but he knew by himself how unpleasant it felt to notice the flow of foreign magic inside the own body. Yet, it was strange that the human felt anything at all, because usually mortals could not sense any kind of magic energy.

He felt how the other's heartbeat steadied after a few moments and evened out, along with the breathing. The human seemed perfectly calm right now, entirely open for Loki's magic. The god was sure that he would met no resistance, should he try to take over Tony's mind, but what would be the point in that?

It would have come handy on his first attempt, but that ship had sailed long ago and he was not here for something like this now.

Loki's attention shifted back to the reactor, which was meanwhile filled with his own magic, touching and prodding at every surface, taking in every single small detail, every tiny spark of energy, every wire. When he had fully examined the circular object, the god finally withdrew his hand and with it also the magic, taking a step back.

Only now he noticed that the mortal had gone limp on the desk, his eyes closed. The magic seemed to have a calming effect on the human, once accepted by his body, even though Loki had never experienced something similar before.

Tony was truly an odd individual.

"Have you fallen asleep?"
"Only a little bit.", Tony answered, then opened his eyes again, blinking a few times when his pupils had to adjust to the bright neon light around them.

"I suppose that's not sense and purpose of that stuff, but if you just let it in, it's not unlike booze. Just... completely different."

Loki shook his head with a slightly amused smile, again wondering about Tony's strange perception of things.

The human shrugged, then hopped from the desk again, since the procedure was over by now, and leaned against it, looking expectantly at Loki. Now where Loki took a closer look, the mortal seemed a bit dizzy, slightly swaying, but at the same time way too interested in the results of that strange expedition in his reactor to relax now.

"So, found anything illuminating?"

"I suppose so. The element you use as a source of energy is capable of much more. At the moment, it produces energy to run the 'electro magnet', as you call it, yet this is only one side of the medal."

Tony skeptically raised his eyebrows, but Loki went on, unimpressed by his expertise.

"It is familiar to me, even though I did not know you could find it on Midgard as well, and I know that it is able to not only produce, but also store energy. In fact, it can even store more energy than it produces, which would solve your problem of energy-transformation and make the Tesseract's
"Yeah, right. Theoretically - brilliant. Practically - useless. I can not access the element. It did not exist on earth until I created it artificially with a particle accelerator - which we don't have."

"So this is no option then...", Loki murmured thoughtfully, his gaze lost somewhere in the distance.

"Not really. Even if we would ask them for a particle accelerator, there is no chance that they would get us one. These things cost more than Adams can afford and even for some Mafia Boss it's almost impossible to get their hands on a machine like that - especially in times likes this..."

"I think we should stick to the current concept... I already worked something out, something that will allow us to extract the cube's energy in it's pure form. I still think it was worth a try."

Loki did not like the almost pitiful look Tony regarded him with while talking, as if he perfectly knew how useless he felt right now, sitting on his mattress all day and having nothing to do than casting a few illusion spells here and there.

Fortunately, Tony's attention was suddenly no longer on him, but back on their work, he put on his shirt and returned to the huge work desk in the middle of the room, motivation unhindered by that small disappointment.

The next days passed only in a blurr.

Loki noticed that Tony was working on whatever construction he was building there every free second, his attention never leaving the cables and the metal under his hands.

There was nothing to be seen from the previous lethargy, from that dull look in the inventor's eyes, every trace of it had been replaced by a grim determination, a challenging glistering in the other's gaze.

It reminded the god far more of the man he had met back in New York, a man who had faced him with no fear and wearing nothing but a smug grin on his face.

Only this time, the look in the inventor's eyes had something different in them, something darker.

Hunger for revenge, hunger for the upcoming battle, maybe even hunger for blood and death.

Loki liked that look on him more than anything else.

The growing paleness and the purplish back under the other's eyes were easily ignored. Tony could barely sleep more than three hours each day, but that was none of Loki's problem, the human seemed be capable enough to endure that. There was no point in forcing the human to sleep anyway, so he let it be.

Four days after the almost-disastrous incident with Adams and his men, one of them visited again, this time only for the regular food delivery – bread and water, as always. He demanded to have a look on the god's foot, more out of spite than anything else, and Loki delivered what he was lusting for:

A perfect stump, covered in dried blood and yellowish fluid, definitely looking disgusting and painful enough to be satisfying.

Tony handed the thug another list of supplies shortly before he left, which were delivered the next day.

Another three days later Tony was finished with a second gauntlet, the shell of the breastplate, and had build a weird construction around the Tesseract, one that would be finally able to extract its energy, at least he claimed that.
"Ready for a little test-run?"

Tony's smile was wide and genuine, almost reminded Loki of a little child with a new toy. Only that said toy was no wooden sword or small animal figurine in this case, but a strange, cage-like construct build around the Tesseract, from which a thick cable lead to two small spikes, opposed to each other.

It was easy to deduct that the energy was supposed to gather there and everything was depending on this construction.

Loki felt himself growing more nervous with every second. Either they were successful, and the machine worked or - the god did not want to fathom what consequences a failure would bring.

"I'm always ready for that."
"Awesome.", Tony commented, already fiddling with the different switches to adjust the settings a last time and check for possible sources of error.

The Tesseract was nothing to be trifled with, since her power could easily destroy the whole surrounding area, like happened with that SHIELD-base back then - if she was not capable of even more. Loki was almost sure of that.

Loki had meanwhile taken position close to the end of the cable, observing the still dead and useless spikes, now and then looking over to the inventor. He was a little nervous as well, but was hiding it behind a mask of simple interest.

"Okay, I'll only briefly turn it on, try whether it works to extract her energy and check the modulator. It won't take longer than a minute - just in case anybody might notice the", he made a vague gesture including the whole construction, "increased activity."

A last look over to Loki and Tony knelt down beside the machinery. The god noticed that his fingers were slightly trembling from his lack of sleep and the physical and cognitive over-exertion he had undertaken during the last days, but it could also easily come from excitement. If this would work smoothly, it would not only be a milestone in the development of their own plan, but, as the mortal had not grown tired repeating, also a milestone in the international research of extraterrestrial power resources.

"Starting with 0.5 % of energy.", he announced, the documenting every test-run seemingly a lifelong habit Loki had become used to during the past weeks, then he turned the switch.

A low humming noise filled the room and immediately, Loki’s gaze went upwards to the Tesseract, whose glow was increasing ever so slightly under the sudden stimulation. As his gaze traveled along the cable, he could made out a flickering at its end.

Barely noticeable at first, but then growing a bit stronger, a spark of light, pure, glistening energy built up between the two spikes.

It was hovering between them in the air, tiny, but beautiful, almost blinding Loki, whose eyes were fixed almost avidly on it. Despite the machine's hum and the crackling noise of the energy there was absolute silence in the room, it seemed like they were both holding their breath.

Tony pressed his lips together, expression a concentrated frown, checking the connected screens for any irregularities. There were none, the Tesseract seemed calm, well-behaved and the human decided he could dare to go a bit further.

"3%, just because it's fun."

Loki heard his muttering as if from far away, then the adjuster was turned a bit higher.

The humming and crackling increased in the same way as the small ball of light did in size. Loki
felt the energy building up in the air around him, penetrating his skin, suddenly so close, available. The sensation was intoxicating, making the magic within his body boil with the desire to touch, to absorb every little speck of energy.

His hands reached forward, closing in to the ball of blue light, the desire to touch the energy stronger than any will not to interfere with the procedure until it was safe.

Just when his fingers were about to touch the orb of blue energy, there suddenly was a loud electrical crack.

Both Loki's and Tony's heads whirled around to the Tesseract, but nobody could react as fast as the energy at the end of the cable expanded, causing thin, bluish white lightnings to run along the cable, connecting here and there with metallic surfaces around.

Before he was even able to turn off the machine, fuses blew with small sparks of light in all ends of the room and then, from one second to the other, everything went black and silent.

"Fuck!"

Loki had barely time to realize what just happened before the lights went on again, flickering indecisively at first, then the computers and other machines booted again, the fridge's ventilator adding to the familiar background noise as a last.

The Tesseract was glowing innocently in her metallic cage.

When it became clear that nothing terrible was about to happen now, Loki looked over to Tony who, after some seconds of disorientation, stared back at him. When the god's expression did not change and remained in a mixture of skepticism and disappointment, Tony snorted with laughter.

"Jesus, don't look at me like that - that was brilliant!", he exclaimed, grinning widely when he stood up again and walked over to the god.

"You caused a temporary blackout, Tony."

"Yeah, that was a little malfunction, since I underestimated the fierce lady's power a little bit, but that's easily settled with some readjustments at the sealing gasket. What's more important: the concept works. I made her offer us energy in small units we can work with."

The mortal stopped in front of Loki, his excitement slowly splashing over on the god, whose fingers were running over the metallic spikes at the cable-end, causing a small electric shock which he was quite pleasant.

"Just so you know, I won't answer to anything else than 'Great Genius' from now on. High Five."

The trickster just looked at the lifted hand with a raised eyebrow, wondering how Tony could possibly think he would engage in such strange mortal celebration rituals, then he eventually gave in and flashed a grin at the mortal, giving him the demanded and slapped his hand.

"You don't actually think I will call you that."

"No, not really. Though I'm worth it.", Tony said, turning around to the computer screens, "Jarvis, have you saved the data?!"

"Everything recorded, Sir."

"So, time for version 2.0."

-----

The preparations for the second attempt to extract energy from the Tesseract went much faster than
the first time. Tony was altering the already existing construction around the Tesseract now, mostly the end where the energy would be focused, which began more and more looking like an exotic flower with every added claw.

"We need to channel the energy properly and focus it on a single point to turn it back into plasma. Otherwise it will dissolve as it did the first time.", he had explained to Loki at some point, an exhausted smile on his lips, when he had found the god staring at the strange thing on the desk.

The long hours of work and the lack of sleep were making themselves more and more felt, but Tony refused to grant them even slightest bit of his attention. He was awfully pale and swayed from time to time, even had to be caught on his upper arm by Loki once as he tripped over one of the cables.

However, he could not simply stop now. No, now he had tasted blood, he knew it would work and so his eagerness did not slow down, never, no matter how much his body yearned for sleep.

It was partly the drive for revenge, revenge that got closer with every second of work, but right now, getting out of this little hell-hole was the first priority.

Tony also found that Loki was sleeping less and less with every day, not because his assistance was needed that much, nor his magic, which was mostly running on its own. He was using the easiest way to manipulate the four cameras in every corner of the room, making them see an entirely different image from what was really happening. At least that was how he had explained it to Tony in one of the rare minutes he took to get some drink and food.

Even though they did not talk about it, the genius knew that it was the Tesseract what kept Loki awake, sometimes staring at her, expression all spaced-out, other times fearful alarm in his eyes without the slightest danger in sight.

One time, the god whirled around and shouted an enraged 'Shut up!' into the otherwise silent room, causing Tony to stop his work and giving the god a startled look.

That was the more obvious influence the cube had on Loki (Tony found himself in a mixture of disappointment and relief that he was not starting to hear voices as well). More often, the inventor found Lokiclose to the cube in its metal cage, fingers touching the shining surface, caressing her like a lover's skin.

Tony decided he would not comment on it.

Fortunately the basic construction of the new Iron Man Suit was finished by now, everything was done from the rougher shell to the fine mechanics within, meaning that they would be able to leave this place rather soon, if everything went well.

Only two things were still missing: One was the energy wiring, which could only be build once they had succeeded in extracting energy from the Tesseract.

The other thing was a little bit more tricky and demanded Loki's assistance.

"What is that?", the god asked when Tony handed him the necessary tool, a long, gun-like construction.

"No weapon. Shoots nano-transmitters under my skin, a new advancement for the suits I had in mind for a while longer. It will enable single components or the entire suits to attach itself onto my body without any help from outside. No unpredictable falling out of windows anymore."
Tony uttered a short, dry laughter at his remark, but it died down quickly when he realized Loki would not answer to it.

"And I am supposed to shoot these things under your skin?"

Loki asked hesitantly, eyeing the gun in his hands with faint curiosity, turning it from one side to another. Tony knew that he had no experience with objects like this, but he figured that pulling a trigger would not be too difficult for a little smartass like Loki. Driving a car surely required more skill and concentration and he had managed that too (more or less elegantly.

"Right here, on the inside of my arms, my back and my chest... I will do the legs myself, but the other parts are a little difficult to reach - especially with only one arm."

Tony shifted in his seat, slowly getting a little nervous, but then reached out and pulled the shirt over his head, revealing the bare chest beneath.

“It will only hurt a little bit, the transmitters barely reach deeper than the skin.”

“Why are you telling this to me. You are the one who is going to be shoot.”, Loki replied to the mortal, this time smirking.

Tony looked at him a little bit taken aback, but did not say anything further on the topic. He was much too focused on the gun that approached his outstretched arm, until the barrel rested on the pale skin right below his wrist.

“Just do me a favor, and don't scream, alright?”, Loki remarked mockingly. He did not even give Tony a chance to answer and simply pulled the trigger.

When the first transmitter was shot under his skin, he jumped a little, yet kept himself from making any noise except for a sharp intake of breath.

His and Loki's eyes met for a second, then Tony gave him a short grin, before he looked down on his arm. There was nothing much to see other than a tiny drop of blood and a slight reddening of the skin which would dissolve in a matter of hours.

Well, that had been a lot easier than he had imagined. There was a tingling burn at the spot where the small device was under his skin, yet it did barely felt painful, more like he imagined it would feel to get a piercing. Only that this was way cooler than something as trivial as a piercing.

"So, one done, another eleven to go for.", he said cheerfully, showing Loki the spot where he needed the next one to be.

With great precision and no hesitation to do what was necessary, the god went on, finishing the other three on the insides of his arms rather quickly, followed by two shots under his collar bones. Tony watched him handling the pistol, the cold, slender fingers running over the spot every time he was done, checking for eventual irritations.

It lost its weirdness to have the god so close to his exposed body, since they had had situations like this several times now. He felt like he could relax under Loki’s treatment, like he could trust the swiftness of his fingers and the precision of his movements.

The inventor's breathing was even and calm, although it hitched every time a new nano-transmitter was shot under his skin.

However, when Loki's hand ran over his stomach, stopping just under the navel where the trail of dark hair began, he shuddered involuntarily, making Loki interrupt his work and look up to meet his gaze. His hand still rested against Tony's skin.
“Sorry. Always had a thing for temperature play.”

Contrary to his intention, he did not make Loki laugh with that and the god's strange stare remained a little longer, until Tony's grin eventually disappeared and he cleared his throat for a more formal explanation.

“You've got awfully cold hands.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Loki's answer sounded almost brusquely, then he shot the next nano-transmitter in the flesh of the sensitive area of Tony's lower abdomen, making him jerk because of the abrupt rudeness.

“Ow! You enjoy shooting at me way too much for my own taste.”

Now, his complaints were met with an amused chuckle, followed by another teasing remark on the fragility of human bodies.

A nimble move of his finger and Loki had wiped away the droplet of blood Tony had not realized was running down his abdomen with his finger, before that finger disappeared in his mouth and, a second later, returned clean again.

The trickster's smirk was enigmatic but contagious and only slowly, Tony turned around to give the god access to his back, keeping eye contact for as long as possible, expression somewhere between confusion and amusement.

Even though he wondered silently about the somewhat strange reaction he had gotten before, the genius refrained from inquiring and just ordered the god to shoot the remaining transmitters at the right places in oral form, now that he could not point to the exact spots any more.

They had needed about fifteen minutes for the whole procedure, but when Loki pressed the pistol in Tony's hand again, it felt like they had not even needed one.

The burning red dots on all parts of his body felt a bit weird, but the itching in the first ones was already beginning to cease again, so he imagined everything would work out like expected.

“Thanks.”

He nodded once at Loki, running his hands over the small dots on his arms and chest, before he went on to do those on his legs as well.

If this would work - and he was certain it would - then he would be able to put on the suit without the help of any robot. Like the bracelets which had once saved his life after Loki threw him out of his tower, his suit would put itself on.

Loki could do all those funny things with his magic, but if Tony could make a full-body armor assemble on his body without moving a finger, it was safe to say that he had his own magic.

Although he had said himself he should wait at least two days to let everything heal completely, he made the first test-run the next day.

Since Loki was leading their spectators to believe in a false video, Tony was able to place himself in the middle of the room, the gauntlets and chest-parts (he had already started with the legs and boots, but was not finished yet) lying in a distance of about 20 feet in front of him.

Loki sat on the couch, now and then looking up to him to see if there was something worth focusing his attention on. His hands were playing absent-mindedly with the Tesseract, twisting and turning her back and forth, fondling the smooth, warm surface like a living creature.

It had become a habit of him to touch that thing as much as possible and Tony found the way he
looked at her a bit weird, sometimes even critical, yet he let the god live out his whim as long as he
did not mind the engineer make Lord Of The Rings-allusions about him.

“Hey, snowflake, I demand attention.”, he shouted at Loki, already lifting his right hand in
preparation, “Watch closely.”

A small, scratching noise as the gauntlet on the floor stirred, at first only moving inches over the
concrete before it slowly lifted in the air and then, with an immense increase in speed, abruptly
flew at Tony's hand.
The inventor was a bit taken aback by the sudden impact, but when he could feel the metal on his
fingers, was able to curl his fingers and let the repulsor glow, the corners of his mouth lifted and he
uttered an enthusiastic laugh.

“You saw that?”, he looked over to Loki, needing attention to show off with his efforts. The god
had finally stood up now and came closer, watching with interest.

“Of course I did. It seems the endurance of that almost insufferable pain I inflicted upon you
yesterday was worth it then.”

A mocking smile glistered in his eyes, then he bowed down to take the left gauntlet – never laying
the cube out of hand, of course - in his hand, weighing it, before he threw Tony a challenging look.

“Child's play.”, Tony responded to that challenge, without hesitation reaching out with his left
hand, and even though it needed more effort to compete with the strength of Loki's grip, in the end
the other part of his suit flew onto him as well.

The chest plate was a bit more tricky, though, flying onto him as smoothly as the other parts had,
yet almost throwing him off his feet with its momentum, causing Loki to laugh and Tony to curse.

It was a bit strange to have somebody present all the time during his test drives, because usually, he
was alone when something did not turned out like he wanted it to or when it turned out even better.
When he was completely clad in the pieces he had already finished, his grin gradually vanished,
until he looked at Loki with an almost solemn expression.

“How do I look?”

“Like you're almost ready for her.”

Loki's response came as serious as his question had been. The endless fiddling with the Tesseract
had for once stopped.

During the next days, he set on to finish the boots.
If they would have to leave hurriedly and unprepared, boots, gauntlets and chest piece were of the
highest importance for his safety and for battle.

Even though he knew that Loki was growing more impatient with every day, they had agreed on
finishing the suit's supply with the Tesseract's energy first, before they would dare to connect Loki
directly with it.

He did not say it out loud, but Tony had a lot of respect for the task he would have to fulfill.
It was one thing to build magazines for the energy, to store it and then use it for the increase of his
firepower later. Transferring uncontrolled energy from a cosmic cube directly into somebody's
nervous system was a completely different story – and that was exactly what he was supposed to
do for Loki.

The thought alone to have Loki united with the Tesseract like that started more and more to concern him, slowly invading his dreams as well by haunting him with images of a ferocious Chaosgod, wreaking senseless havoc driven by the unstoppable force which radiated from the cosmic cube. If he had been thinking of the god as weird for his low mumbling with the cube from time to time, he could not deny that he slowly started to feel it to.

Or at least, to feel something odd, which could easily come from sleep deprivation as well.

There was a power in this cube, a power that did not have any direct effect or did not claimed any specific performance, but which made Tony work like a maniac and, every time he fell asleep, drowned his dreams in a cold blue.

Again, several days passed.

“We're ready for the next energy extraction, come here Snowflake, I need that cube.”

Tony's voice seemingly tore Loki out of his thoughts and the god lifted his head, tearing his gaze away from the blue sphere in his hands.

He spend the most of the time like that, perched on his mattress, his dirty and torn hoodie serving as blanket or pillow, the Tesseract in his hands, while Tony was working.

Tony had seen it: Loki even held the cube in his hands while he slept – if he slept at all.

Still, he handed the enginneer the cube without hesitation and watched as it was shoved into the opened metal cage, which closed and lit up the moment the Tesseract connected with the right dots. The tingle of static energy increased – everything looked well.

“Get it running, Jarvis. But shut it down before we have another blackout.”

“Very well Sir.”

There was the crackling noise of energy and the Tesseract's energy, formerly only surging through the metal cage, lit up the entire cable, following it until the very end where the focusing elements – now fourteen claws instead of only two – sparked with blue light.

Then there was a high and sizzling sound of electricity, or more precisely, pure energy meeting pure energy. Rays of blue light from each claw met each other in the center, forcing the otherwise loose power into a form.

The entire procedure ended as fast as it had begun, this time without a blackout, without any explosions or blinding light. The machine simply shut itself back down, the only blue light now coming from the Tesseract itself and a tiny sphere that was caught within the metal claws. Apparently solid, shining blue, levitating and pearl-sized, it looked almost unreal to Tony.

“Wow, something is finally working.”, he said with a pleased, yet tired smile on his face, as he regarded his creation.

Loki reached out to take the energy-pearl out of the construction, as if the raw energy was an irresistible decoy for him, but his long-fingered hand got slapped away before he came even close to the shining sphere.

“Eh-eh-eh, this one is for me. You already got the big cube to play with. Anyway, I think you're a little too old to play with marbles.”

The god only quirked his eyebrows when Tony made a reference on his expanse which seemingly, he did not understand, as always. Yet, he was a good boy and pulled back his hand as he was told
“Try it, I want to see what it can do.”
Tony chuckled at the demanding tone in Loki's voice. The god's eyes were still fixed on the blue marble of light like it was the most fascinating thing.

“You're as eager as me, wow, that's a nice change of pace, you know... Let's try it out.”

Tony took the sphere out of the construction with a small tweezer and carried it carefully over to the desk where one of the gauntlets laid, already opened on, the fine mechanics exposed to the eye. Loki followed close when Tony bent over to the gauntlet and placed it into the gel on the gauntlet's inside. Almost instantly, the sphere was sucked into the soft mass, the blue light suddenly blurred through it.
Then, all of sudden, the entire gel lit up in blue, only around at sphere at first, but slowly, through small tendrils that spread though the entire gauntlet, up to the repulsor.

“Energy conducting gel, Stark Industries patent. No problems with broken wires and short circuits anymore. Also much more efficient for high voltage.”
Tony had started explaining automatically, enjoying to spread his genius again, but also sensing Loki's amazement at the strange structure inside of the gauntlet.
However, he was way too impatient to go into detail.
Lifting his hand, the gauntlet lifted itself simultaneously, as if reading his thoughts. The dark-grey, plates closed around his hands as smoothly as they had done it during previous tests, they did not look differently though, despite the new energy source.

“Time to test this baby...”
Tony rose his hand, aiming at the already wrecked wall at the end of the room.
The gauntlet made a whirring noise, then a blue light started to radiate from it, not only from the repulsor in the palm of its hand, but shining out of every small gap between the metal plates, intense and full of raw energy that waited to be unleashed.
It had nothing of the bright golden and red suit Iron Man had worn before, nothing of the smooth metallic, shining surfaces. This armor was dark and bright at the same time, its edges rough and the surface tainted black from the lack of better machines.
Tony thought it fitting.

A shiver ran through him when he stared at the gauntlet, anticipating, but in the same time fearing the power he could unleash with it.
It was Loki's voice who gave him the final push.

“Do it!”

The pulse of energy shot through the air with racing speed, but it was nothing like the first test.
The blast hit the opposite wall with incredible force and, at the moment of impact, the entire building shook.
The already wrecked wall was entirely torn apart, molten stone splashed into all directions, causing thick fume where it hit the floor and objects were wiped off the tables through the intense shock wave.

Silence followed, the only sound the low rustling of sheets whirling through the air and the sizzling of the molten stone. The hit wall was completely shattered, an orange glowing crater torn deep into, revealing the natural stone and concrete behind it and expanding over the entire wall's length.

Tony stared at his deed, at first shocked, then pure excitement spread over his features.
“Did you see that? Holy shit! … and that's only one gauntlet! Wait until I have the rest of the suit equipped with these things.”

Tony gestured wildly now, ran back to his stuff in a hurry, fiddling the gauntlet off his arm and then scrambling to get the flying papers off the ground. The huge and genuine grin never left his face while doing so and Loki responded to that with a smile.

After all the abuses and delays they had endured during their trip, they finally had a real success.

“I think we're ready.”

Tony stopped in his movements upon hearing these words and turned around to Loki, grinning like a madman at the god.

“Yes, we are.”

Chapter End Notes

First touchies *_*
I really want to write more of those D:

The thing with the nano-transmitters and the self-assembling suit parts was of course inspired by Iron man 3, since this story is an alternative Post-Avengers scenario, we thought that Tony might have had this kind of adjustment for his suit planned for a while longer.

So here we are again, and two weeks turned into three. We hope to pick up on our previous pace of writing, through atm there isn't a guarantee for anything, there is a lot going on in our both RLs, but we can most likely guarantee for one chapter each week, though.
“You feeling fine?”

Tony's question was more directed towards the desk, as he was intensively scanning the geared up armor-parts in front of him, than to Loki, who was leaning against the table at his side.

In contrast to the inventor, who was checking on his stuff a last time, the god was radiating a calm anticipation, a confident smile playing on his lips – the thought of their upcoming escape and any problems they might face did not concern him.

The mortal regarded him with strange looks from time to time but apparently decided to just go with it – it was not difficult to guess that behind the nervousness, Tony felt more than equally longing for it. The pent-up emotions of humiliation, of powerlessness and sheer endless deprivation were boiling hot inside both of them.

Loki could sense it like the barely noticeable vibrations in the air in prospect of a heavy earthquake: Some dark, grim force was boiling under the mortal's facade and only waited to be set free, to test out his new, unbelievable power and to teach those a lesson who had dared to underestimate him.

Loki would be there to witness it.

“Oh, yes, but I would certainly feel even better if you would finally move on with the plan.”, he eventually replied, regarding Tony with a smug grin.

The inventor looked up now, shooting the god a sore glance. He just quirked an eyebrow in response, then nodded toward the camera at the other corner of the room.

The sudden spark of excitement was prominent in the human's features – this part was probably the one he was looking forward to the most. Certainly it would satisfy the most childish urges within the man.

“Never badger a master at work.”

A quick, last wink in Loki's direction, answered with a smirk from the god and then Tony held up his hand, watching as the gauntlet assembled around it in less than half a minute.

The blue glow seemed brighter now, more urgent, and Loki could feel his pulse quicken at the sight of it. Even though they both were treating the subject like it was a joke, like it would be nothing but a child's prank, there was a certain tension in the air.
As if one sole spark would be enough to let the air go up in flames and cause a devastating wildfire.

And now, Tony would become that spark.

A few quick steps and the mortal was positioned in front of the surveillance camera. Loki noticed him staring at the red-blinking light, as if his gaze was meant to pierce right through the cables and the tech and end up making the spectator on the other side feel uncomfortable.

The mortal stared for a few moments longer, then set up a charming, amusing grin before he lifted the gauntlet, repulsor-light glimmering brightly. Granting their captivators a mocking farewell, he waved his hand, then brought it to his mouth, placed a light kiss on the dark metal surface and turned it in an elegant motion to flip the bird at them all.

In the next movement, the repulsor beam hit the camera, transforming it into nothing but hot ash and molten concrete. Turning on his heel to attack one point after the other, he quickly, efficiently destroyed every surveillance camera in the room.

There was silence when he was done, gaping holes in the corners of the room where the cameras had been, the smell of molten metal and stone in the room.

Loki was quite pleased with his performance he had just got, this strength was certainly what they needed for this war. They only required one last test: How the repulsor would affect creatures made of flesh and blood.

“500 bucks they will need less than 5 minutes.”, Tony announced, looking over to Loki with a challenging grin.

“You do not have that much money, Tony.”, Loki's snicker was interrupted when he had to wave his hand in front of his face, shooing away the smoke.

“So, you're in.”

At a lack of a watch, Tony checked the computer for the time, then he leaned against the table at Loki's side, facing the door at the other end of the room.

The minutes seemed to stretch like half an eternity. They spent them in silence, the only thing the god could hear was the thrumming noise of the mortal's heart-beat beside him.

After 4 minutes and 36 seconds, one heard screeching wheels from above.

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Tony grinned.

“I won.”

Their joking was immediately forgot as every nerve in Loki's body became taut from anticipation and built-up energy, the tip of his fingers tingling from magic.

His green eyes were locked on the opening roller door, watched how the dirty metal moved aside, revealing the driveway behind.

Only that this time there were no cars behind it, but seven men.

And this time, they did not carry such small weapons like on the previous visits before, but heavier armory.

Huge machine guns with a strong penetrating power.

“I thought you to be smarter than that, Stark!”

Loki heard Adam's yelling echo from the walls of the great the hall, then spotted the mortal in the midst if the group, a deadly looking huge gun in his hands.
He carried it with the demeanor of a man who had used said weapon to kill before and had no qualms about it. His grip was steady and controlled, despite the obvious display of a threat. He still thought himself to be in an advanced position, even when faced with a gleaming repulsor.

The god threw a look in Tony's direction. Despite the power he held in his hands - a power that could easily level the entire building they were in - the mortal displayed a sense of nervousness, but right now, Loki could do nothing about it.

The magic within his veins was screaming to be released. His entire being lusted for blood, for revenge, revenge on the mortals who had thought it possible to subjugate him. He, too, would teach them a lesson, but it would be the last one they were ever going to receive.

“What is this supposed to be - an assault, a plan to escape? You think you'll get out of here, just like that, without completing what you came for? I'm disappointed. Maybe we should've chopped off your foot instead.”

Loki noticed how Adam's eyes flickered over to him, as if reassuring that he was no threat. He was still leaning against the desk, his legs and the regrown foot hidden behind the piece of furniture, out of the mortal's sight.

Putting on a disdainful smile, he nodded his head in Adams' direction, challenge glistening in his eyes.

In an instant, the attention of everyone in the room was on him, not on Tony anymore. As if led by an invisible command, Adams' men were slowly coming closer, weapons pointed at him. Only two of them held their barrels into the direction of the ex-billionaire, yet they were not able to take their eyes off the spectacle unfolding in front of them.

That was the good thing about men like Adams: Their power and belief to be superior made them easy targets for provocation. The human could not withstand the temptation to put Loki back in his place, not after the subtle, but still unmistakable display of insolence. He had a reputation to lose, after all.

Yet, when the five men had closed up on him maybe a little more than ten feet away, Adams did not come for him. Instead, he stayed behind his men, answering Loki's look with a self-assuring smile. His gaze briefly moved over the surrounding area, as if looking for a trap, a hidden weapon, a bomb, anything.

As he apparently did not see anything alike, he turned back to face Tony, who was still surrounded by the remaining two soldiers, now separated from Loki. He seemed not the least bit intimidated by the gauntlet on the inventor's hand, maybe because he believed that his lackeys would shoot fast enough to kill before Tony would be able to use it against him.

How wrong they all were.

“You don't look so well Adams, did they forget your hay-ration this morning?”

Tony's voice interrupted the tensed silence and for a second, Loki had no clue what he meant. He seemed not to be alone with that notion.

“What are you babbling there, Stark?”

Tony met Adam's angry glare without faltering, his face a taut mask. There was still a little time to play, a little time to see how much it took the other to snap. Loki decided to enjoy this.

When the inventor answered, his tone was conversational.
“That’s what they feed guinea-pigs, isn’t it?”

There, only visible for barely a second, Adams face twitched in confusion, then he had regained composure again. The smile on his face as he shook his head was meant to be demeaning, but Loki knew that Tony was far from caring.

“That’s what you wanted to tell me, Stark?! Apparently you actually have gone completely mad now. Watch your mouth, or I might come to the conclusion that your mind is far too wrecked to be still of use for me.”

From the corner of his eyes, Loki saw the other's grip tighten around the machine-gun. Adams started walking, slowly encircling the inventor now, maybe a subtle attempt to get out of the line of fire from the repulsor. Tony had taken the hand down by now, not following Adams with his eyes, but went on like he had all the time in the world.

“No, I'm no longer of use for you.”, the engineer resumed the talk, “but you'll be of use for me – for us.”

A small grin appeared on Loki's face, barely visible for anyone but Tony himself, who knew it was there. He was playing with Adams now, like a cat played with a mouse, right before it devoured its prey. Only that Adams had not realized yet that he was the mouse.

“What the HELL are you talking about?!”

Adams suddenly snapped, half hissing, half yelling, the cold, hard barrel of his gun pointing harsh against Tony's neck. A grin crept on the genius' face, the he turned his head to Adams. There was open fury in his eyes and Tony was without doubt mere words from getting a round of bullets in his face.

“You're the guinea-pig, Adams, the test-subject, the lab-rat. Your reaction will tell me how great my invention really is – only that you still think you're on the other side of the cage.”

“ENOUGH!!”

Adams yell tore apart the thick silence in the huge room, the clicking of his unlocked gun shrilling in Loki's ears. He noticed how every muscle under Tony's skin tense in anticipation, the repulsor slowly coming to live in his palm as he stared down the barrel of Adams' machine-gun, an almost cruel grin curling the corners of the his mouth.

It was that moment of escalation, that moment there already had been the last straw. Loki got back on his feet, and slowly walked around the desk, right in front of Adams' men.

“Sir!”

The first of Adams' men to see the regrown limb became to another as pale as a ghost from one second. The urgency in his voice was so alarming that even Adams looked over to him unwillingly, postponing the execution for a second to follow his man's gaze downwards on Loki's body, who was grinning widely.

When Adams got sight of the regenerated foot, one could pinpoint the exact moment he realized that he was doomed. A second later, his disbelieving stare turned into a grimace of panicked rage.
“What are you waiting for, you dumb shits?! KILL THAT FUCKER!!”

The mortal's shout was the one thing that finally made something snap inside Loki, as if a switch had been turned. Magic, previously prickling under his skin in a taut anticipation and screaming to be released, flared up as it was unleashed, a raw and untamed force set free, lusting for death.

A high, screaming noise filled the room as the air was torn apart by the energy cutting through it, and the one man closest to Loki did not even have a chance to pull the trigger of his weapon.

The machine was torn apart, hit frontally by the raging power that was Loki's magic, metal splinters flying into all directions.

Only the moiety of a second later, the high noise of breaking steel was accompanied by the sound of bones being crushed.

The energy blast hit the mortal in the head, unhindered, transforming the previously solid bone within into nothing but a splinterly mush. Blood, water and liquified cells were splashing into all directions.

The construct that had once been a human skull gave into the pressure, painting floor, walls and close bystanders red.

The fight had not lasted more than a second when the first body hit the ground, limbs disarranged as if boneless.

Screams filled the air, screams of pain – one of the men held his bloody hands pressed to his face, were a piece of flying metal had torn out a huge chunk of flesh – and screams of rage.

Loki rose his magic shields around himself and Tony, then hell broke lose.

Every other noise in the room was swallowed up by the gunfire that followed the first attack. Pretentious creatures that they were, the humans had not realized yet how hopelessly lost they were.

Something metallic flew past Loki, a part of Tony's suit, assembling around the mortal's vulnerable flesh. Then, the first repulsor beam sliced through the air, hitting – no, tearing apart - another one of Adams' lackeys, who had just started shooting at the suit's head.

The smell of blood and scorched flesh hung heavy in the air, fueling Loki's blood-lust even further. It felt so good to be no longer forced to subjugation, to have his power again and it felt even better to wage revenge upon those who had dared to humiliate him, to cause them pain and to see them falling before him.

And this, this poor excuse of a criminal and his dumb lackey – they were only the beginning.

The god felt a wave of hot air surge over his skin as another repulsor beam was released from the gauntlet, hitting another enemy. Shreds of scorched flesh and bones fell to the ground, as most of the body had simply vaporized.

When the third of their comrades fell, the humans seemed to realize that this was a fight they could not win - their weapons were useless against the armor's thick shell and the magic shields.

At the sight of the destroyed corpses, unmasked horror distorted their faces and, finally, the remaining three turned around to follow Adams out of the hall, running for their lives.

Loki was having none of it.

A burst of magic, and the metallic roller door came crashing down, whirling up layers of dust.

Another spell, and one of the fleeing mortal's was hit in the back, his spine and muscles easily
giving in to the impact. He fell to the floor, still alive, but inevitably sentenced to death with his lower body paralyzed and intestines spread over the ground beneath him.

Now only three, including Adams, were left, cornered at the spot that had once been the exit, the only other door out of the hall at the opposite of it.

One of the two remaining men, the one who had chopped of Loki's foot, tried to escape to the side, sidestepping like a frightened rabbit rather than acting by reason, but his life ended as quick as the ones before him.
A flash of light, and nothing was left but scorched flesh.

Loki went for the other one that was left, releasing green flames onto his enemy. He was ablaze seconds later, screaming and falling to the ground as his skin blistered under the heat and the fire devoured him.

Adams, as the only one remaining, attempted to run past Loki, aware that his only chance of escape was provided by the door at the other end of the room. He was clever enough to use the short distraction his comrades and the fire had provided, yet his attempt was without success.

With a jump, Loki caught the fleeing human and brought him down. He heard a few bones breaking upon the impact of his heavy body, maybe rips and a few fingers.

“What now, mortal? No weapons, no one to protect you, no chance to run.”

The words were pointless, merely meant for humiliation.

He wanted to see the fear in the human's eyes, wanted him to realize that there was no chance of escape. Loki wanted him to kneel in front of him, to crawl at his feet, beginning for mercy. However, to his great disappointment, Adams did not make a sound except for a cough from the dust, staggering to get back on his feet.

The god did not hesitate long.

He simply stepped forward, placing his foot onto the human's pelvis, hindering from getting up, then leaned down with his entire weight and strength. Again there were bones breaking, this time louder, audible through the entire hall. Adams screamed as his innominate bone was crushed under Loki's food, head thrown back and eyes tightly shut. In a vain attempt to remove his leg, his hands were clawing at the god's ankle.

Loki watched the scene beneath him, eyes cast on the squirming mortal caught on the floor. The screams were pitiful, but the trickster's face remained like stone, deprived of all emotion.

The sight of one of his enemies defeated, injured and helpless and absolutely at his mercy was satisfying, yes, but it was not enough yet, far from it. There was still something he had to repay the mortal. His features spread into a wolfish grin.

His foot still holding down Adams jerking body, still ignoring every screamed insult or attempts to escape, Loki bent down. His hands dug into the flesh of the human's tight, hard enough to let the blood vessels within burst, then, with a strength only a god could possess, he tore it away from the body.

The thick bone within the leg snapped like an old branch. Huge muscles ruptured with a shredding
noise, but most of all there was blood, splashing out of the veins in small fountains, sullying everything within proximity.

Loki barely heard the mortal's screaming, now desperate and deprived of any speech. His mind was filled with the stench of the blood that had sprinkled on his face and his hands, the red a stark contrast to the pale white. Only hesitantly he let go of the heavy limb, which fell to the floor with a loud thud. Wiping a hand over his face, he only smeared the blood further, then he licked his lips and regarded his deed.

Adams was whimpering, curled into himself, unable to sit up with his shattered bones. The hands scrambled helpless at the stump, somehow attempting to stop the bleeding.

Loki chuckled. This was what he had been waiting for, this sight exactly.

An enemy, reduced to nothing but the animal he was, nothing but fear and agony.

Still, Adams was not dead yet, and there was still someone else who wanted to have his fun with him. The god rose his head and looked at Tony, who stood a few feet away, unmoved, faceplate opened and staring at the spectacle unfolding in front of him.

His expression gave nothing away, impossible to tell whether he liked what he saw or disapproved. There was not even the slightest twitch in the expression, not even when his gaze traveled over from the jerking body on the ground to Loki, panting from excitement and oozing from his enemies blood.

The god took a step back, an obvious sign that it was Tony's turn now. Yet the mortal did not move, just stood there as if frozen to the ground, staring at the dying man on the ground.

“It is all yours now, Tony.

Do it.”

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If one thought about it from a distanced position, the sight of the whimpering, frightened man on the ground was nothing but pitiful: Blood was gushing out of his stump, yet he was still somehow trying to crawl away, his fingers desperately clawing in the concrete floor. He was too heavy to move himself, too weak to escape that scruffy cellar he knew would be the place of his death.

Tony clenched his jaw.

This man actually believed his life was worth saving. Not even in the face of his impending extinction he had the dignity to admit how utterly despicable a life he had led. If there had been even the tiniest spark of remorse in Adams' eyes, Tony would have hesitated. Perhaps he would have just left him here, to die or to be found and live on as a cripple.

However, there was nothing like that.

When he came closer, he felt a bit like sleep-walking all over again. He watched the scene from outside, distanced and unaware, but in the same moment he sensed every ugly detail far more than he usually could. The stench of blood and powder, of burned flesh and singed hair, droplets of sweat running down his neck, his heart-beat hard and steady in his chest and Loki's eyes, his expectant stare.
He did not take his time to inspect Adams any longer, he merely stopped the pathetic scrambling on the floor with a metallic boot on the others ribcage, causing a sharp gasp from his bloody lips. Usually so generous with big words, he could not find anything in his head which would adequately deliver how he despised the man, how he had waited for this moment for weeks now.

Fuck - he had waited to feel powerful again for over half a year!

The hunger for revenge devoured him in an ecstatic rush, easily running over any moral issues, setting his nerves on fire and fogging his head to a point where he could not hold back a grin creeping on his face.

When Adams' disorientated, hectic eyes met the cruel stare from above, Tony suddenly had enough.

With an ugly wet cracking noise, the skull split open as reinforced metal met vulnerable human flesh.

In the same way Tony's mind was flooded by the hot rush of adrenaline, coming with having limitless power over life and death, Adams' blood splattered across the floor. Pink parts of brain mixed into it, sulllying the boot up over his ankle in smeared red.

When he let go of the limp body and withdrew his foot, there was only a crunched, frayed hole reminding of the face of one of Las Vegas' biggest gangsters.

Tony swallowed, face frozen and lips pressed into a merciless thin line. Only now he felt the small sprinkles of blood on his face, but he did not care. The feeling of power had pulverized in the same second Adams' brain had been squished into unidentifiable sludge, leaving nothing behind than a foul taste in Tony's mouth and just the vague notion of triumph.

They were free.

As if returning from far away, he suddenly remembered Loki was still there behind him, watching him all the time.

Their gazes met as he turned towards him, but he could not muster to return the grin the god spent him.

“Let's get out of here.”

Moving through the cellar they had spent over a month in, now felt more like moving through a battlefield. During the fight, Tony had barely looked twice at his hits, satisfied with the thought that they were dead and therefore no threat any longer.

Now, it was impossible not to look.

Blood everywhere, smeared on ground and walls, sprinkled everywhere in a thin layer of red where heads and body had simply exploded in red mist from Loki's magic. The genius heard a cracking noise he could not place every time he set his foot on the floor, until he realized that these were probably splinters of metal under his boots - either metal or bones.

It was awful, but there was no feeling of regret coming up within him.

He was claiming his reward now.

Before he could even think of packing their stuff and moving on, the sight of the roller door was drawing him towards it with an almost irresistible lure. A blast from the repulsor and it was nothing but molten metal and splinters, still fuming when he stepped through it.
Loki followed close behind, then at his side, as eager to get outside as he was, although the god already had his one time walk.

Bright, blinding daylight welcomed them as they stepped out of the facility.

The dry sands of Nevada, hot wind tousling their hair, letting the sweat and the blood dry quickly and immediately causing new perspiration again.

It was hot, but it felt like the most amazing thing in the world right now. Like he was finally waking up. A grin brightened Tony's face again as he closed his eyes for a few seconds, exhaustion and relieved tension having no chance against that immense feeling of freedom.

Phoenix from the ashes. Again.

Dry grounds and hot wind all over again. Only that this time, he was not on the other end of the planet. He had the most magnificent weapon he had ever created in his command, he was not powerless, not depending on the chances of luck to be found in the middle of nowhere.

And he was not alone.

Looking over to Loki did not reveal whether the god felt the same or similar. His gaze was traveling over the flat ground, looking far, probably seeing further than Tony could right now. Despite all the dirt and the blood and the ugliness, he found that the regained power really suited the god.

They packed the material they still needed in the Hummer truck parked outside, the truck bed filled with tools and devices he had built or got from Adams - even the pathetic computers got a place. He did not keep track of the time it took them to pack their stuff.

They were working efficiently and almost silent, like the place held a certain meaning which would end destroyed if anybody said too much, stepping over body parts with the casualness one could only muster if you broke a room full of corpses down into justified means for a worthy end.

In the end, even the back-seats were stuffed with all kinds of things and a huge plastic cover was put over the cargo area. Nobody needed to see what they were transporting.

When they were done, there was not an inch left inside the black hummer, besides the two front seats of course.

Only one thing left to do.

Tony ensured that there was enough distance between the car and the driveway down to the hall - he did not want anything to catch fire – then he strode off.

He had not said a word to Loki - who was currently cleaning himself from the blood – since he could do it on himself easily.

Walking back into the hall, the small explosive he was carrying in his right hand felt heavier than it could physically be.

It was clumsily and hastily made – poor work for someone who had created and built the world's best weapons once and still did – but it would be enough to destroy the cellar, including all evidence that anything interesting had ever happened here.

He did not feel remorse or disgust for what he had done. It was a simple necessity to let the bodies disappear and the whole ugly room with it.

Tony had just set the machinery down onto the blood-soaked floor in the middle of the room, when he felt Loki's presence behind him. The god had moved without making a sound, as always, but if
one lived long enough together with a particular person, it was possible to sense them anyway.

"What are you doing?"

The god's voice was followed by the sound of his quiet footsteps as he came closer, rounding him to have a better look at the little device on the ground. From the corner of his eye, the inventor caught a glimpse of blue light, where Loki had hid the Tesseract in the folds of his hoodie.

"Blowing the place up. Destroying the evidence of our presence here."

To his surprise, the only response he got from Loki was a snorting laughter.

"I would consider a blown up cellar like this evidence nonetheless, no matter how destroyed it is. If someone is looking for us, they will know that we've been here anyway."

"We can't leave it like that.", Tony would not let himself be convinced otherwise, “Not with some of the machinery still here and the corpses all over the place – it's like I signed with my name."

"Let them know. Does it matter? Look, Tony, this place is desolated. No one will look into this wretched ruin of a building. The only way to attract unwanted attention is an explosion and a black cloud of smoke. Let it be, we have no time to waste."

There was a hand around his upper arm the next moment, firm and demanding. Tony licked his dry lips, eyes quickly locking with Loki's, then, slowly, he bent down to pick up the explosive from the floor.

"Okay, let's leave."

Loki let go of his arm, seemingly assured that he would do the demanded and leave the hall without further complications. Neither of them looked back as they left the room they had spend more than a month in for the last time, nor did they observe the mess they had made out of a few men that had been whole and alive hours earlier.

He would not regret any longer.

He would not look back.

There was no further discussion when Tony took place on the driver's seat and started the motor, while Loki hoped on the passenger's seat, Tesseract clutched to his chest as if it was his favorite teddy bear.

They left the plain deserted ground behind the facility with screeching wheels, whirling up dust and sand. With a few movements of the steering wheel, they were back on the cracked asphalt street, heading of to their next aim.

The East Coast.

Chapter End Notes
I enjoy writing stuff like that way too much D:
Before she entered the great main hall again, she tugged at her dress another time and fixed her hair. A look in the tiny pocket mirror in her clutch told her that her lipstick was still in-tact as well, nevertheless she painted her lips over another time.

Natasha's face gave away nothing when she walked through the 'Staff Only'-door at the backside of the casino, entering again in background noise full of clattering one-armed bandits, laughing and clinking glasses.

With a low thud, the door closed, unnoticed by anybody else.

Behind it, in a room further down the hallway, lied the bodies of two heavily muscled bodyguards, knocked unconscious for the next five hours.

Only half an hour ago, they had followed her in blindly, expecting the fulfillment of every single one of their simple dreams - in the end they had received nothing but the beating of their lifetime.

Knowing her destination, the spy headed through the pleasure-seeking crowds, until she finally reached the bar. An elegant movement and she had slid on a barstool, taking the drink in front of her and drank it down in one go without making a face.

“Thank you.”

“I thought you'd fancy one.”, Clint answered, his gaze wandering over the leaving and incoming people.

In contrast to Natasha, he felt uncomfortable in such fine threads, but he was too much a pro to pick on his tie every two seconds.

Eventually, he turned towards her, leaning on the bar. Although he disliked being so dressed up himself, he certainly enjoyed looking at his partner like that. The dress was, even though still elegant, quite saucy, as it had a purpose to serve, but side-effects included Clint's stare on the area where the leg slit revealed her skin way up to her thigh.

Natasha did not mind, though.

One knowing smirk and Clint knew she had seen him. With a quick grin, he changed topics and came back to business.

“What did they say?”

“Stark has been here. With Loki.”

The archer's eyes darkened for a moment, but he would not interrupt her until she had told him more.

“They turned up here from out of nowhere, looking pretty ragged, and Stark insisted on seeing Adams.”

“That's the guy who owns the place?”

With a gesture of her hand, Natasha ordered another Martini. They usually did not drink on missions, but she knew such a small amount of alcohol would not have an effect on her.
Also, this mission was different from their usual ones.

Fury had contacted her a few weeks ago. He had caused her to interrupt her current project, something which rarely occurred and always meant emergencies. And indeed, the disaster which had enfolded hidden from the public's eye was certainly top-priority and therefore needed top people. SHIELD had not that many of top people any more.

Clint had already been in Los Angeles when she had arrived from half around the world, the thick fur coat she had been wearing now way too hot for the climate. Even though the cause was unfortunate, it had been wonderful to see him again, after all what had happened.

"Yeah, he is the owner. 'Though it turns out he has not shown up here for two days now - which is not uncommon in these circles..."

"... but it smells funny.", Clint ended her sentence and Natasha nodded thoughtfully before she went on with the more interesting information she had been able to gather.

"They tried to bargain with Adams, yet they could not tell me about what."

Her partner's frown spoke for her own confusion, for it did not make sense why Stark and Loki should have come to exactly this place for help. From what could be deduced from the records, Stark and Adams had a not-so-rosy history of mutual disdain which, however, had never stopped Adams from trying to buy his share of Stark's wealth and success in form of his weapons. Either the ex-billionaire had to be really desperate to turn to somebody he knew to be far beneath him or there was something else they were missing.

"Yet, their bargain seems to have backfired, since they both have been walked off against their own volition and brought to some facility in Adams' possession. They could not tell me more, but I think they were just not important enough to have been trusted with more information."

They both fell silent for a while, staring at the glossy surface of the bar.

"Our next aim is pretty obvious then, the facility. If we're lucky, they might still be there.", Clint said, taking a last sip from drink and emptying it in the same gulp.

Natasha nodded knowingly and shifted on her seat, ready to leave.

She really did not know what to expect from this mission, or from the whole scenario. Stark running off with Loki seemed one of the least likely things after what had happened to the billionaire and if there had not been trustworthy information from Steve, she would have assumed that the inventor had been mind-controlled. It was still an idea which would not get out of her head and she would only cast it away when she had first-hand evidence against it.

Although, if you listened to Steve, he was not. Apparently, he had followed the god out of the hospital on his own accord, both of them too battered up to make it on their own and forced to seek out the help of a man like Adams.

She doubted that anyone of the two was dead - only an idiot would kill a man like Stark without making use of his abilities first - and Loki... she doubted that the god would let himself be killed by a bunch of mortals.
Still, the possibility was there, and she did not like it at all. If one of the two was dead, it meant that two of the most valuable weapons in this war had been lost. Despite everything Fury had said, she was not out for a kill – not yet.

"The facility then. Let's just assume that they are still there and alive. I'm not fond of the idea that we'd have to report Fury about Loki's death and the loss of the Tesseract.", Natasha said with a final tone to her voice. She quickly finished her drink as well, attentive gaze casually roaming over the crowd within the hall.

"A you kidding? The guy is like a fucking pest, you don't get rid of him just like that. I hope Stark is still alive, though. He always was a funny fellah - until the thing with Pepper happened."

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at her fellow assassin.

"We have the order to take Stark down, if necessary. Fury thinks he is too much a risk, probably too unstable to keep him alive. When we catch him, I'll have a look at his condition myself, before I decide if to kill him or not. Stark's abilities are too valuable to throw them away if there is a chance of persuading him into cooperation again."

"And what about Loki?"

Clint's face was earnest, deprived of any humor, his eyes shining with a hatred she had rarely seen on him. The archer had not forgotten what the god had made him endure, how he had forced him to kill and endanger the ones he actually wanted to protect.

She did not need an answer to know what the archer was about to say.

"The moment we have the Tesseract safe, I will put an arrow through his forehead. This time, I'll make sure he doesn't catch it."

They both feel silent after that announcement, lost in thoughts for a few moments. Then, as if following an unheard command, both assassins got up from their barstool, left an sufficient bill on the counter and walked out of the Casino, over the street where their dark red Lotus Evora was parked.

The car looked like every other random sportscar you would find on the streets of Vegas, yet that this one was stuffed with SHIELD tech on the inside, recording everything in near proximity and constantly feeding the headquarters with information, while recieving data in return. Yet, when they entered the car, Clint on the driver's seat and Natasha on the passenger's seat, there was no new message from Fury - which all in all, was a good sign.

No news, these days, meant good news.

Clint started the motor, while Natasha entered the approximate coordinates from the map - hidden in her purse and marked by one of the unlucky guys, who had been forced to deliver information - of the ominous facility in the GPS, watching closely as a digital map of Vegas and the surrounding desert emerged on the screen.

"The facility is somewhere around here.", she tapped on the screen, "it was once some kind of substation, but was deserted in the early 90s and no one ever bothered to knock it down."

"Sounds quite like the place where Mafia Bosses bring their unlucky debtors to give them a bullet
in the head.", Clint said with a smirk.

"Yes, quite the place."

After the wheels had stopped, they had to wait for the dust to settle down again before they could enjoy the full view of the facility in front of them. Even though the car-interior was cooled down by air conditioning, one could see the air shimmering above the dry ground outside, a visual indicator for the simple fact that it was just incredibly hot. The thermometer displayed over 98°F.

“Looks inviting.”, Clint commented dryly.

The ground around them was flat, some smaller mountains blurring into the blue of the sky in the distance. About half a mile in front of them, there was the huge, anonymous property, a wrecked looking concrete block surrounded by a high wire-fence, in Adams' possession, the place where Stark and Loki were said to be held captive. From what they could see now, the place was deserted and no longer used, but that could easily be a trap. Surely they would upgrade security when confronted with such a renowned captive, so it was likely they would meet guards inside. Nothing they were not prepared for.

Natasha adjusted the last parts of her catsuit, the pretty evening gown a crumbled heap on the backseat. Dressing up on the backseat while Clint was driving had become a routine which had slowly ceased to attract interested glances through the rear view mirror from her partner. Clint had already changed, his bow was waiting in the trunk.

“5 minutes passed, no patrolling security. Surveillance cameras above all entrances and on the roof, 12 in total. I'll take care of them.”

The archer flexed his fingers, then started to tap them on his thighs impatiently. Through his sunglasses, from that distance, he had probably noticed more of the scenery than any normal person would be able to. Natasha trusted him completely.

“You'll take the East entrance, I'll enter from the West.”

She, too, was feeling anticipation. They had no idea what they were about to find - if they would find anything other than outdated machinery under thick layers of dust.

In what condition would Stark be when they found him? And, probably the greater problem, in what condition would Loki be? There was a chance that they would not only have to fight off some salaried guards, but their former teammate as well, teamed up with the god who had not so long ago brought chaos to New York city and then, later, the whole earth. That chance was not even that small, considering the fact that Steve Rogers had been brought down by Stark before.
Fury had given them specific orders, yet the ways of interpretation were plenty.

He wanted both fugitives alive – if possible. Diplomacy was the primary goal, yet they had been explicitly allowed to use force if necessary. The chances it would become necessary were high and Fury was intelligent enough to know that. They were to contain collateral damage and arouse as minimal attention from the public as possible - quick and efficient, SHIELD's philosophy.

Although the intelligence organization had been decimated drastically during the second devastating wave of attacks against earth, it still worked busily as a global network. From the situations of crisis spreading further and further around the globe, whole governments had become unstable. There had been riots and demonstrations, a few coup attempts in Mexico and the trust from the surviving people into America's leaders was destroyed after the decision to use nuclear bombs on native soil.

In times like this, intelligence organizations as well equipped and flexible as SHIELD were the true forces behind the machinery which was global politics. Natasha knew not much about it - it was impossible to see through the whole of Director Fury's impressive timetable – yet she knew from the variety of places she had been traveling to during the last weeks that they were far from giving up on earth now.

In fact, they were probably the biggest motivators for expeditious rebuilding the world had right now – but as always, only the fewest were aware of that.

Individuals stepping out of line such as Stark were a danger to any redevelopment. The ex-billionaire had become unpredictable, a threat not only to himself, but to others and that alliance of convenience he had with Loki – because what else could it be? - was proof of that. He had gambled away any chance of redemption – especially in such an unholy alliance as the one he had formed with the Trickster God.

Earth was not ready to face new enemies now, so they could not allow to bother her with a an old one.

Advantage was: they knew Stark - Natasha probably knew him better than he knew himself. Also, they had already fought against Loki and knew his 'style', so to speak. Having him as a captive would give them information they desperately needed, because who else than he could tell them anything about the Chitauri's weaknesses? Also, he would be their last straw in their attempts to contact Asgard and thereby, get in contact with the rest of the universe.

The god, however, was a wholly different dimension of threat.

Not only could he have regained his magic by now, able to wreak havoc just like he had used to, but his intentions towards Stark were completely in the dark. Had he persuaded him into an alliance? Which promises would bring a man like Stark to believe him? What did he want on earth other than using it as a refuge from the Chitauri? Maybe, by now, he had succeeded in taking over his mind, using the genius' intelligence for his own sake, like he had done with Selvig and so many others.

Like he had done with Clint.

Even though he was a professional, Natasha knew it was probably the best if she would find the god first.
Not that she would not grant him that pleasure, for how Loki had fucked with his mind.

“Let's go.”

Natasha looked over to Clint, who just nodded firmly. His face did not give anything away about how he felt, but she knew him good enough to know that his fingers were itching to get his revenge. They both left the car in studied synchronism, then got armor and ammunition from the trunk, getting ready for a fight.

While they were closing the distance towards the empty facility in a timely manner, the archer got out his bow. One arrow on the bowstring, inhale, shoot, exhale – next one. Natasha knew that sound, the familiar pattern, knew it like her own heartbeat, and did not spent too much attention on the surveillance cameras which, one after the other, exploded. She scanned the area for anything interesting while they approached.

“You think anybody will be sad if we just kill the little fucker before we get Stark? I think the boss will understand.”

Clint tried it the umpteenth time now, even though he knew the answer.

“Try to hold back, honey.”, Natasha answered, a small smile curling her lips.

A last time before they would part to enter from different directions, she laid a hand on his upper arm, enforcing her last sentence, when suddenly something made her tighten her grip.

Immediately, Clint stopped and looked over, bow still at half-staff. His eyes followed her gaze, focusing on the far corner of the Eastern wall, where the faint rest of tire marks was visible in the dusty ground. They looked at each other for a second, then acted after their changed plan without losing a word about it. While Natasha headed for the backside of the building, Clint collected the lost arrows, just to follow soon after.

From just the sight of those marks, the chances that they would find something here had increased dramatically and a certain tension was in the air when they made their way around the building. The tire marks ended behind the building, where they found a Hummer, empty, though the marks apparently came from a second vehicle. Then, they spotted a driveway that lead down, under the building, and to something that looked a lot like a blown apart garage door.

Natasha raised her eyebrows.

“Whatever happened here, seems like we are too late again.”

“You think they escaped?”

“What does this look like to you?”

Clint just gave a grunt as a response, then moved on without hesitation. He almost seemed frustrated that they would not be able to encounter the two fugitives and Natasha could understand that only too well.

Their hunt had been successful so far, since they had been on the right track from the beginning
and had been able to follow the path of Stark and Loki up to this moment. However, they were always lagging behind just one step:
the hotel room, already cleaned from the bloody mess Stark and Loki must have left on the sheets, the gas station where the owner had given them a vivid description of the two ragged fellows in the fancy sportscar – every place posing more questions than it answered.

And now, this.
Even though they could not be sure, her intuition told the spy that there lied no threat in this place any longer.
Nevertheless, she had the feeling that maybe this would be a little more enlightening.

“I feel like in the beginning of a horror movie.”, Clint muttered when they walked down the short tunnel into what appeared to be a huge hall.
Indeed, there was dried blood all over the dusty stones on the floor and walls of the driveway in the shape of footprints.
Mentally, Natasha prepared to find corpses down here, be it those of Adams' men or those of Stark and Loki.

Still, when they entered the hall completely and stepped in the bright neon light, she had to swallow – and the Widow had seen her share of corpses in her lifetime.

"What the fuck...", Clint muttered beside her.
Two pair of eyes equally fixed on the blood-bath in front of them, they slowly stepped over the remains of what had once been an Aluminum roller door and now reminded more of something that had crept right out of a volcano.

The entire inner hall looked more like an old slaughterhouse than anything else.
Dried blood everywhere: the walls, the floor, the remains of furniture – yet, the corpses were the worst.
Those that still were clearly recognizable as human bodies were completely torn apart, as if a giant force had ripped right through their chests and heads.

The two assassins could count themselves lucky that the air inside the hall was almost as dry as the desert outside and therefore had mostly contributed to the bodies dehydration, not their decay – still, it was anything else than a pleasurable sight.

Natasha guessed that there were six corpses in there, maybe seven. Hard to tell when of some men were only shared shreds and parts of outer limbs left.

A small noise from the side let both spies jerk their heads away from the dead bodies to their feet and grip their weapons, turning it into the direction of the noise.

"Only a coyote."

The archer let out a visible sigh and lowered his taut bow once he had spotted the canine at the other end of the room.
The animal rose its head and sniffed the air for their scent, then it strode over to one of the corpses, inspecting it carefully until its teeth sunk into the skin and started gnawing on it.

They had let their guard down to easily. If this had not been a coyote, but something – or somebody – else...
One could never know.

"Yes, only a coyote..."
Natasha tore her gaze away from the eating animal, inspecting the place of crime further. Contrary to her partner, she did not try to avoid the dark russet puddles of dried blood to her feet.

Once the situation could be classified as safe, they inspected the whole hall, even threw a few glances at the few machines that had apparently been left in the hurry, or had been too much to carry.

From what one could deduct from a first sight, it was clear that someone had been working down here. That meant that Stark was in the business again, in one way or another. Which meant, that he was armed - the bloody results of his work were scattered all over the place. One could not be sure who had destroyed the whole Western wall of the cellar and who had transformed the roller door into a heap of melted metal, but whether it had been Loki or Stark, the outlook for SHIELD was bad.

Thankfully, it was not the assassins' business to gather DNA-samples and secure evidence – surely it would be a feast for the SHIELD-forensics.

Even though they were again left with nothing but hints and vague ideas of what had happened here, this place differed from what they had encountered before. In contrast to those displays of disease, of powerlessness and nothing but the survival instinct of chased animals they had visited, this place told the story of regained power.

Natasha could not quite fathom why, yet she was sure that these remains of an unfair fight had been left to see for a purpose. The sheer ruthlessness of leaving the place like this was almost proof enough that somebody had wanted to make an impression.

This place was a warning.

"Do you think Loki did that?", Clint asked after some minutes of silence in which they had crossed the entire hall.

"That doesn't look much like Loki here."

Natasha had come to stop at the side of one corpse that lay closer to the wall, yet was still not to miss with the immense puddle of blood all around it. One leg was missing, positioned a few feet further to the left. It looked as if it had been torn off by sheer force, no impact of any weapon on the the wound. The head however gave a different view, at least what was left of it. For the plain eye to see, the gaping hole in it was the imprint of a boot - one that could only belong to one thing.

"Shit, Loki really got him."

Clint had approached her from behind and was now looking at the same dead body in front of them, the same crushed remains of what had once been a skull. Even if it was only a guess, they both knew that this had once been Adams.

Natasha bent down, sticking her hands into the pockets of the man's sullied jacket, yet she found nothing, no ID, no note, not even a bit of cash. The identity of most of the corpses could only be determined through a DNA test, with their bodies ripped apart until the point of no recognition.

However, that was not her task to do.

"You go and inspect the rest of the building, I'll make the call to Coulson."
Her partner only nodded, then he was off through the metal door that lead out of the hall, apparently upwards into the remaining complex of the building.

Natasha got out her SHIELD phone, dialing Coulson with a few swift movements of her fingers and barely a few seconds later, the ringing stopped and the agent's voice echoed in her ear.

"What did you find?"

Classical Coulson, always to the point.

"Not what we hoped to. Stark and Loki are gone, they took a car. At least two days ago if not longer, judging on the state of the corpses and the tire marks."

"So they killed the guys that kept them captive? Is Adams dead?"

"Most likely, through we'll need tests to confirm that. Let's just say that the bodies are not in the best condition."

That was a mild way to put it.

"We'll need the forensics people here, we can't take care of this by ourselves. We're on their tail. They drove eastwards and there aren't many streets there. They've got no places to hide. I fear it will be our only opportunity to close up on them."

There was silence on the other side of the connection for a few seconds, then Coulson answered:

"Alright, follow them, I'll take care of the rest. And be careful, Agent Romanov."

"I will be."

Then, he hung up and the connection was filled with nothing but suffocating silence.

"Alright...", she murmured to herself and put the mobile away.

As long as Clint was gone, she used the opportunity to check the remaining bodies for any IDs. Of course there were none.

When the archer returned a few minutes later, the information he brought were equally disappointing.

"Nothing worth mentioning in the remaining rooms. A lot of crumbling concrete and two bird-nests. What did Coulson say?"

"He's sending someone to take care of the situation here, we are supposed to follow Stark and Loki, the sooner the better."

Clint's eyes lit up, keen to leave the depressing concrete hole not even half an hour after they had arrived, but mainly, because he could barely wait it to get his hands on Loki.

He still had things to settle with the god.

"Alright, let's go."

Chapter End Notes
Have some Clintasha :D
Even though it was almost too tempting to simply look for a hotel in their nearest proximity, stop there for a combined five course menu and a three hour long bubble bath, they had decided it was best to get as far away from Vegas as possible, first.

Tony had been driving for the first 5 hours, taking the car to its limits.

It was as if his nerves had become over-sensitive during their month-long deprivation. The same he remembered that Cheeseburger after Afghanistan to be the best fucking Cheeseburger he had eaten in his entire life, he now was almost overwhelmed by the intense blue of the sky above them, the feeling of the sun on his skin, the smell of the car's leather-seats and the exciting thrill to race over the deserted street with a speed that was far above the allowed limit.

Loki was quite silent on the passenger's seat in the beginning, staring on the street ahead of them or out of the window on his side.

They had both agreed on making the first greater stop in some no-name-town called Escalante, although the god showed a certain reluctance against using a hotel. Too easy to spot, too simple a target, too many people.

Yet, there was nothing which would come between Tony Stark and a decent shower today, so they had eventually also agreed on taking a cheap suite again. Just like old times, Tony had said with a grin, and then wondered that he actually knew Loki enough to make joking allusions to their shared 'past'.

Without verbally admitting it, Tony was somewhat grateful for the silence which had followed for the next hours. He needed those hours to really, really leave that cellar. Not just physically, for he felt the cold blow of the air-conditioning and the bumps in the street every time he drove over them quite well. It was more of a mental departure he had to realize.

After all, it was a damn mind-blowing step from being trapped in an underground concrete hole to freely driving in their dead captivators' SUV towards an uncertain future. Once again, realities were shifting and changing, leaving a ruptured feeling of time and space for which no physical explanation could be held responsible.

Yet, quick adaption probably had always been his greatest virtue – from the few number of virtues he sported.

After several hours and a short break, they changed positions and Loki was allowed accession to the throne of what was the driver's seat of a typically American gas-guzzler. The car was easier to drive than his Audi R8, as it was an automatic gear box, and Loki got the hang of it quickly – although, admittedly, driving on a straight line for miles after miles was not exactly challenging.

The entire time, they did not speak of their rampage back in Adams' facility.

Topics revolved about future plans only – and much more pragmatic, urgent needs.

“Alright, it can't be ignored any longer. I'm starving – I'm dying for some high-caloric, teeth-
corroding sugared and soaking-of-sated-fats food.”

Tony’s announcement came after only 10 minutes of Loki’s driving, in which he had tried to doze off in vain, again and again wakened by a sound, a bump in the street or a fleeting thought.

“And apparently, the car does, too.”

A quick glance on the gas gauge told enough of that – they would soon be left stranded.

“I was waiting for you to say this.”

There was unhidden amusement in Loki’s answer. Still, despite all of the ‘petty, fragile mortal’-attitude, the inventor bet he was aching for something to eat as well.

“Gas station is half a mile.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll make it.”, Tony muttered, a certain grumpiness manifesting slowly.

When they reached said gas station, there was already an established plan on how to proceed – because fact was: they were still short on money.

Even tough they had collected every single dollar note they had found in trouser- and coat-pockets, in total those added to not more than meager 459 $. It was money they needed for a hotel-room and would not waste if not necessary.

Having to be frugal with money was something Tony still could not quite grasp as a concept, but he would not give a single fuck about something like money right now.

Therefore, with everything they had endured and everything they had achieved so far, they were again reduced to burglars.

Only that their means had significantly improved since last time they had been in such a situation – contrary to their appearances which were, frankly, unacceptable.

“And he won't remember a thing?”

“It is like you have been sleeping. He won't know what has happened”, the god assured, then left Tony at the car to go inside and fetch some food.

“Don't hurt him.”, Tony added, already putting the tap in the gas tank.

Loki just chuckled as a response, not turning around another time.

Tony bit down on his lower lip, hard, wondering where the sudden care for some random stranger came from.

Well, he did not really wonder, he knew. He just wish he did not – but he would not start regretting something which had been absolutely legitimate.

When the gas tank was full again, he headed inside as well. Every second longer he had to wait for some goddamn food was a second closer to him throwing a tantrum.

Inside, Loki was strolling through the aisles full of food, seemingly undecided what to pick.

The mere sight of the Twinkies advertisement made Tony's stomach rumble, he really did not know how the god could take so long to decide, with all that food right in front of his face.

A quick look at the cashier revealed the nature of Loki's spell which seemingly caused some temporary blackout in the brain: the poor fellow was staring at the wall with a blank expression.

Tony was not sure if he could trust his eyesight, but he was almost sure he could see some saliva...
“Don't tell me you're picky now.,” he said mockingly, then pushed himself in front of Loki and started grabbing every single one of the vibrantly colored plastic packages he lusted after: Chips, wrapped sandwiches, chocolate bars, filled chocolates, gummy bears – hell, he even grabbed the package of raisins Loki skeptically weighed in his hands. He would probably eat everything now.

“You don't want to eat just anything after such a long time of old bread.”

Tony and Loki shared a look, then the engineer cocked an eyebrow, causing the god to utter a low sigh.

“Well, at least I certainly won't eat just anything.”

They stored all of it on the backseat - Loki providing some efficient packing-skills Tony certainly lacked – between the masses of equipment.

Still, before Loki would remove the spell from the cashier and before they would get in the car again, there had to be at least ten minutes for a break.

With a satisfied grunt, Tony slumped down on the ground to get some shade, leaning against the huge black car.

From everything they had just illegally purchased from the shop, it was a chocolate bar which had made it in the end.

While Tony unwrapped the precious candy, Loki sat down at his side as well. He had been watching the empty street for approaching cars, yet they were completely alone. It had become quiet on those streets recently, since there was no destination to drive to any longer. At least for those people who still valued their life.

“What are you eating?”

It took Tony - mouth agape, sweet, delicious chocolate only inches away from bringing his gustatory nerves to orgasm – a lot of willpower to answer first.

“Here. Have a break, have a Kit-Kat.”

He shoved some of the remaining chocolate bars over to Loki, then sunk his teeth in the candy. Only the slightest bit over-acted, he rolled his eyes in a display of pleasure and uttered a long drawn-out groan.

“Sweet Jesus!” he blurted out, mouth still full, “This is- mmh, this is paradise!”

Despite every portrayal of relish, Loki's skepticism seemed only mildly damped, but at least he started unwrapping his chocolate as well and, after a short moment of consideration, took a bite. The expression of surprise in his face when he started chewing made Tony for a second forget about his own ecstasy. Soon surprise changed into blissful satisfaction and the inventor could not hold back a wide grin.

“This is actually... really good.,” the god admitted freely.

“Told you.”

They remained where they were, right there on the floor, indulging in the simple pleasure of
approximately 20 percent of one's daily demand for sugar, for about half an hour. Half a bottle of Coke followed, then some tuna-sandwich and Tony felt like a child getting a sugar-shock. He loved every second of it. They had a right to celebrate, be it the last time before they were done with … everything.

The mood had severely lifted when they entered the car again.

“Bon Jovi... Neil Diamond... Celimé fucking Dion! Geez, that's the tracklist from 'Greatest Ever! Soft Rock'.”

The genius skipped through the songs on the attached iPod he had just found in the car like some sort of additional gift, rejecting every single interpret after only a split-second of judgment. Apparently, good old classic rock was not en vogue with the criminals of these days. Yet, Take That seemed to be.

“Wow, that is the single most heterosexual combination of interprets I've seen in my life.”

Now, even Loki chuckled, despite his lack of knowledge about contemporary pop music.

“This is unbelievable...”, Tony could not hold back genuine contempt.

“I know none of your mortal bards, but I could happily live without having made their encounter – from what I have overheard, I doubt there would be anything that wouldn't insult my ears. Have you considered that, sometimes, silence is the better option?”

Tony did like he had not heard the last comment from Loki and pressed play on the touch screen.

“Okay, this is remotely acceptable.”

The first accord of Eric Clapton came from the – actually rather impressive – sound system and let a satisfied smirk appear on the inventor's face. How he had missed music!

“As always, I was right with my assumption.”, Loki commented drily, yet with a smile and did nothing to turn off the music.

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Loki started the car's engine and they left the gas station, the spell falling of the mortal once they were out of sight.

Tony had begun to hum along and move with the music once the car was in full speed, swinging his whole upper body from left to the right and back on the passenger's seat. The god might have told him to stop his unnerving behavior, yet the good mood was infectious and Loki soon found himself grinning widely at the strange display of the Midgardian's joy.

After what might have been an hour, he lost track of the distance he passed.

The landscape looked almost the same, no matter in which direction he looked. However, he had the vague feeling that the amount of the strange spiky desert plants, those kind you only found on Midgard, increased with each passed mile. Slowly, the desert made room for a more rocky scape and the area around the street was not a plain as the landscape anymore, but hemmed with strange sandy structures and conifers. Somehow, their shadows helped Loki feel a bit more at ease. Hidden by those small mountains,
they could only be spotted from above, and there was no flying vehicle in sight.

At the moment, everything seemed safe.

Despite the quite luxurious interior, the car did not have a navigation system like their last one. So, they had to rely on a crumpled map they had found in the car's glove box which all in all did not prove to be that much of a problem. Loki was used to paper maps, shred of maps and even vague marks on paper through his many travels across all of the nine realms.

Anyway, the plain landscape with barely any civilization and the long never-changing streets did not offer many opportunities to get lost. Additionally, they had the sun as their constant companion, so Loki knew where he had to go.

Summarized, after four more hours of unhindered speed, three bottles of coke, two bags of chips and five chocolate bars, they reached Escalante. In comparison to the Midgardian cities he had visited so far, this one was nothing more than a better village. Rows and rows of streets and houses giving the impression like they had been built overnight, since barely any of them were made from solid stone.

After a day of driving, they now were more than 300 miles away from the place they had escaped from this very morning.

It was dark outside when they left the car, the only lights left the blinking neon sign of the motel and a dim glow here and there coming from out of a window. They were still so far from greater civilization that the shining stars above were clearly visible. Well, at least the tiny fraction one could see with bare eyes while staying on Midgard.

The haze of the desert heat had been replaced by the nightly chill of coming winter and Loki enjoyed the sensation on his skin for a while, face lifted to watch the starlit sky.

It was quiet, even peaceful.

One would never guess that the very same planet this little town was located on, currently served as the stage for one of the biggest wars ever known to the Nine Realms.

“You gonna stand there any longer? I'm freezing my ass off.”

Tony's complains tore Loki's attention away from the sky and back to the mortal, who had slung his arms around his shivering body and looked as if he wanted to disappear in his hoodie.

“No, I was just... thinking.”

Together, they left the almost empty parking lot in front of the motel and went for the reception.

Previously, Loki had cleaned off the greatest amount of blood from their faces, hands and the brighter pieces of clothing with his magic. Still, he did not want to waste too much of his precious powers for unnecessary task.

So, they would look wrecked anyway.

The woman behind the reception counter looked decidedly too curious for Loki's taste. Yet, apparently, business was not going too well, since she did not ask any questions and just took the money and handed them the keys for their room in exchange.

No one of them spent any attention to the hotel's interior, they just both headed to their room as quickly as possible without any detour.

And then, finally, the door feel shut behind them and they were in their room, every noise from
Tony made no stop to take a look around, he just threw the food he had been carrying on a small desk at the other side of the apartment and then was off to the bathroom. A minute later, Loki heard the splashing sound of a running shower.

Now alone and forced to wait, he let his gaze roam through the entire room. All in all, it did not look much different from their last. The Midgardian concept of appropriate color schemes still did not take his fancy, yet he would not complain. Anything was better than a moldy mattress on the floor.

Slowly pacing through the small room, the god eventually sat down on one of the wooden chairs close to the window, leaned his head against the glass, and stared outside. He would have loved to lie down in the bed, the fluffy blanket, the clean, fresh sheets and the thick mattress looked way too inviting to delay testing them for even a minute longer.

However, he did not want to sully the bed with his dirty skin and clothing - after an entire month, and those countless months before, Loki could wait a few minutes more.

The noise of water eventually ceased and a few moments later, the door to the bathroom was unlocked. When it opened, it revealed Tony, completely naked except for the towel around his waist, hair damp and a hand full of wet clothing.

He looked a little awkward at first, seemingly at a loss of what to do with the clothes.

“I seriously need some rest. I forgot that we didn't have anything to change, so I cleaned the stuff anyway. Never thought I'd have to do that again.”

He wiggled with the soaked jean in his hands, then put the heap of clothes over a metal construction on the wall and turned a small wheel at its side.

“Hope this is working. It's late October, they probably should... oh, yeah, it's working. Seems like we're gonna have a cozy night in here”

With a satisfied smile, Tony arranged the wet clothing properly so it would not crinkle and then slid under the blanket on his side of the double bed.

Loki did not comment any of his actions, he just watched the human with interest, before he remembered what he had been about to do: Showering.

The bathroom walls were tiled in a strange dark yellow, some of them with a hideous stylized flower on it. Tasteless - there was no other word for it - but as long as the shower had running water, the tiles could be colored however they wanted to.

The first plashes of water on his greasy skin felt like the embrace of a long lost friend and Loki could not hold back a low groan.

Once it was flowing in streams over his entire body, the god leaned back against the wall and simply enjoyed the soothing caress of hot liquid over his cold skin.

After some time, his entire body had heated up and the previously pleasant shower began to feel a little too warm to be still pleasant, he took the small bottle of liquid soap provided from the hotel and started to clean himself.

The greatest amount of dirt had been washed off by the water by now, yet the fresh smell – despite an artificial note he could smell in it – was something different entirely.

It felt good to wash himself and feel nothing but smooth, unmarred skin under his hands. It was a nice change of pace that for once, there were no wounds, no broken bones or overwhelming
exhaustion to take care of.

He felt complete again.

Once cleaned, Loki stepped out of the steaming shower to take his clothing and threw it into the shower's tub. He waited carefully until it was soaked full of water, then he started to clear it of any remains of their one-month imprisonment. The procedure was not half as pleasant as showering himself and quite tiresome, but it was necessary.

The dripping wet, yet clean results, were taken back into the main room and put on the – surprisingly warm – metal to hang besides Tony's clothing.

“Kind of ironic that you're still wearing underpants with a SHIELD-Logo on them.”

From what he could hear in his voice, Loki did not even need to turn around to know that the mortal was smirking at him.

“Is it?”, he finally responded and turned around to look at Tony in the bed, who looked rather satisfied with himself now.

“Obviously, but hey - who doesn't want to have an eagle on his underpants?”

Loki did not deem it necessary to answer to this remark. Instead, he finally climbed into the bed as well, right at the human's side and then removed the towel around his waist, before he pulled the blanket up to his chin.

Soon, the blanket adopted the warmth his body was emitting and Loki felt his heart-beat slow down as a pleasant drowsiness filled him.

Even though they were not safe from intruders or nightly assassinations, he felt no nervousness. He was strong again, strong enough to take on whoever it dared to attack them, even without the powers of the Tesseract. And having Tony, quite literally, at his side, he knew that the only thing their enemies would meet when challenging them was certain extinction.

Yes, Loki allowed himself the smallest notion of optimism for the future.

The blue light of the reactor filled the gray twilight of their room, the shining circle still evoking the urge to touch, although Loki now knew the secrets it held. In the half-dark, the god could see the mortal's eyes were still open, contemplating about something, as always.

Somehow, after that month spent together in captivity - saving Tony's life, getting saved by him in return – and after having experienced this total dependence on each other, every trace of awkwardness had vanished. They were now soldiers in this war, comrades probably, they had dealt with each other's body out of sheer necessity – shying away from sharing a bed now would be nothing but childish.

They held their distance to each other, though.

“Good night, Tony.”

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“Mh-hm.”
Tony had already closed his eyes, lying on his back with his hands comfortably behind his head. While Loki had been showering, he had already been enjoying the totally underestimated privilege of an actual bed with clean sheets and a fluffy pillow.

Even though his body felt like it was melting in the mattress and he was scrubbed clean like a newborn child with the warmth of the hot shower still prickling under his skin, he did not really become tired.

Minutes went by in which Tony did nothing but listen to Loki's breathing and the rustling of sheets now and then when the god changed his position. It was comfy, almost homey – if you ignored a grand deal of minor disturbances – but the longer he remained in this bed, waiting for his mind to come down and relax, the more his previously good mood started to darken.

Where he had been joking about Loki's underpants before, the smirks and mocking remarks now turned out as the manifestations of what they had originally been: nothing but a rush of happiness hormones, released by the enormous stress lifted from his shoulders and increased even by the adrenaline kick through killing their captivators. 20% might have also been induced by sugar.

He had sensed it before, a few hours ago, when they still had been in the car, but he had decided to make it shut up.
A dark foreboding in the back of his head, telling him that their liberation was merely a small step towards their final aim, that they had spent way too much time in that cellar.
The nagging doubt which had been haunting him from the beginning.

It had never really left him since their departure in his mansion.
It had come back, attacking from behind like the goddamn treacherous creature it was, when he had been working, or when he had been in that unstable condition between waking and sleeping.
He could not tell for sure, but he believed that its impact had probably been repressed by the presence of the Tesseract.

Yet, now the Tesseract was back in Loki's interdimensional backpack and Tony was currently not working on anything to occupy his mind with – and now, when he should be reaping the fruits of his labor, that dirty little bastard referred to as 'doubt' came back.

When they would be done – would it have been worth it?

He had a new suit, sure. He had crafted the most powerful suit he had ever build and he had hunted down some of the most annoying gangsters of the state – but what value had such a destructive weapon counted against the losses which had built the pathway to its creation?

After all, he was still here in a fucked up hotel room, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, sharing a bed with Loki.
He had turned against anybody he had ever considered friends, he had turned against SHIELD, had shit on dozens of laws of the United States - he had cast away the remains of his fortune for a lousy trip of revenge for the sake of a woman he would still never see again.

Fuck.

There he was again.

Pepper. He was doing this for her – that was his sole reason, that was what he told himself. And still, he was certain that she would despise him for what he had done.
Never would she have endorsed dealings with Adams, nor his pathetic death, not even making such a pact with Loki in the first place. She would have been disappointed in him, like she had been so often in their life.

He could perfectly picture her frightened, yet unforgiving stare when she had seen the bullet holes in the Mark II the first time. That look he would so often see on her face from then on, judging him when his actions went beyond his usual nonsense.

Shit. He could still see her face so clearly in front of his inner eyes, like she would just be there if he opened them again.

But no, of course she was not. He found nothing out there but the dark, dusty hotel room, and he was a stupid, self-deceiving jerk for actually thinking he could just conjure her back.

This was nothing but another sad escape route to get his ego back together. He was not doing this for her - he was doing this for himself.

He was doing her wrong.

“Oh, god, fuck...”

The genius uttered a loud, long-drawn out groan, still staring at the gray ceiling. Then, a second later, he attempted to get up and leave the bed, a precipitate reflex to just get... somewhere and do... something, anything, to forget. The pesky towel, however, had not been part of his calculations and therefore he remained fiddling with the piece of cloth a little longer, halfway between sitting on and stepping out of the bed, until Loki's voice reminded him in a slightly upset tone that he was not alone.

“Where do you intend to go?”

“Out. If just that goddamn towel of hell would not...”, his grumbling died down while he tugged at the white cloth again which got entangled with the similarly white blanket.

There was a sigh from the other side of the bed, then he heard rustling of sheets as Loki sat up as well. He could sense his body, just a few inches behind him.

“No Tony, I would like to sleep now and I would recommend you to find some peace as well.”

“Yeah. Bet you do.”

The inventor's monosyllabic answer seemed to have caused Loki to rethink, since when he answered, his voice suddenly sounded concerned, almost tender.

“The dreams have not stopped, then?”

Tony bit his lip.

“It's not like that.”

“Then how is it?”

“You wouldn't understand.”

Tony eventually turned around to look at Loki. He doubted the other asked for his well-being out of spite - they were far beyond those sadistic power plays - yet he would never pour out his heart for him just because he was successful in conveying real worry.
They both fell in stubborn silence, his plans to leave the room momentarily forgotten as his eyes were still locked with Loki’s. Even though no one said a word, there was communication, because as always, his eyes gave away more than he wanted to. Tony was just unable to hide his inner turmoil completely.

And again - he was not sure if he should be thankful or hate him for that – Loki seemingly was able to read from his eyes what his mouth refused to speak out.

“You’re still questioning what you are doing.”

There was no hint of accusation implied, otherwise Tony would probably have gone ballistic. There was just surprise – and unmasked curiosity.

“She would’ve hated it.”

The words were out before he could hold them back. For months he had not spoken about Pepper – in fact, he had never brought up her name again in Loki’s presence after their first encounter. The god knew nothing of their story, nothing about her death, about her importance and by that, he could merely guess Tony’s motives.

Loki looked thoughtful for a second, weighing his answer before he spoke again.

“This might be true, yet it is only of minor importance for our quest.”

In one moment, Tony actually felt the urge to snap something cruel at Loki for the impudence of his words. Only problem was: he knew he was right.

“Yeah. Knew you wouldn’t understand.”, he said instead, cracking a lopsided grin.

“So, tell me.”

“I will do shit.”

“It will make you sleep better. Or at all.”

“What are you, my psychiatrist? It’s already in the files, I respond poorly to conversational therapy.”

“Tony.”

The urgency in Loki’s voice when he said his name was striking and Tony felt his resistance falter. He looked into the god’s eyes again.

“It’s not exactly appropriate as a fun bedtime story.”

“I did not expect anything the like.”

With a deep sigh, Tony leaned against the bed-frame, blanket or towel - or whatever it was at the moment - covering him again.

“Just a sip from what’s inside the minibar would totally make this easier.”

It was a stormy autumn Saturday. The sky was covered in a gray layer of clouds, nothing unusual
for this time of the year.
When he had woke up this morning, Jarvis had informed him about the average temperature of the
day which had been about 73,4°F. Yet, he had not been outside to check on it himself yet.

If not for the soundproofed glass of his windows, he would probably hear something of the typical
rush hour noise from the streets down below or the construction noise caused by the still ongoing
reconstruction work in the tower.
Yet, he heard nothing but the Beastie Boys playing on his sound system.

The day had been uncommon only in so far as he was doing exactly nothing.

He was lounging on the couch, randomly playing with one of his Stark-pads on his stomach, a
forgotten mug of coffee on the table, probably cold for an hour now.
Even though he was not exactly sure where, he knew that Pepper was somewhere in the tower as
well, making mincemeat out of the architect who had messed up the 19th floor.

It had been a thoroughly relaxed day so far.

Anyway, during the last six months things had started to plateau at something close to normal
again.

People had been burying their dead, and were still rebuilding what had been destroyed during the
attack on New York and it had not been all that different within the small group of people who had
played a great role in the city's rescue.

SHIELD had been dealing with issues like casualties and the countless accusations and claims for
the Avengers to pay for what they had been forced to destroy for the greater good, so that those
responsible had not been bothered by it.

Therefore, Tony had found time to find himself some new projects to kill said time with, including
the buildout of what one could have called an Avengers HQ (because it had been pretty damn
obvious that they had made an awesome team back then) and to come to terms with his girlfriend's
vigorous anger at his suicidal date with a nuke.

They had had some pretty bad fights, fights in which Tony had often enough not been able to have
the last say.
However, in the end, the underlying issue had been an old one and the more time passed between
the current event and today, the more it had been replaced by other things to fight over.
Like it had always been.

One could say that they were happy.

At least Tony was, and Pepper told him she was, too. Happy in a way you could get used to. Happy
in a way that made you long for such horribly old-fashioned terms as 'Forever'.
It was not that either of them threw around big words like that, but there was a nice feeling of
continuity to it.

More than once, the genius had already caught himself feeling that maybe this endless, chaotic
rumble of his life would eventually find something like an anchor.
Not one that dragged you down and kept you from holding your pace, but one that would finally set
the world in place.

Suddenly, Jarvis' voice interrupted the Beastie Boys' right to party with his smooth British accent,
the lack of music leaving the room oddly quiet.
“Sir, SHIELD reports unusual atmospheric developments. The recorded numbers are not unlike the patterns recorded during the opening of the portal above New York.”

Immediately, Tony abandoned the tablet, eyes fixed expectantly on the empty sky outside.

“Told them they shouldn’t lay there hands on nasty alien technology if they can not handle it.”

“With all due respect, Sir, but there is no evidence of such an attempt in close proximity.”

It took Tony a split-second to deduct what that meant, two seconds before Jarvis announced a call from Fury and a minute before the inventor himself sent for Pepper.

It was just a feeling, this need to have Pepper on his side (she called him over-protective, but so what). Just in case something might happen – he would not have been able to go through this ‘failed last call’-scenario another time.

He just wanted her to be around, to be safe – whatever happened.

When the elevator door opened and the clicking of heels behind him told of Pepper’s arrival, Tony was already standing at the window, watching the city with his hands in his pockets, his foot tapping nervously on the floor.

“What’s wrong? What ominous code-word is “atmospheric disturbances” - did you burn something? I can’t smell smoke.”

“Actually, it's not me this time – I think.”

Just when he turned around to face her and explain the situation – in a state where he was still unsure if there actually would be a ‘situation’ – her eyes widened in shock.

Tony whirled around again, knowing what he would see before he saw it.

There, on the plain afternoon sky, something broke through the clouds.

One of the huge beasts, Leviathans they had called them – one of those things which destroyed a whole skyscraper with one accidental brush of their big, fat fins.

“Oh my god...”, he heard Pepper mouth as others followed, another two, then another, then another. Despite their slow movements, they descended quickly – way too quickly to evacuate, way too quickly to think twice.

“Jarvis, the suit.”, Tony said with a cool voice, not taking his eyes of the scenario as small battleships followed the Leviathans, different models from what they had seen in their first battle against the Chitauri.

Evidently, they had upgraded their army.

“Very well, Sir.”

Then, the first impact hit the tower.

Its brute force carried both Pepper and him off their feet. The ear-splitting bang sent half of the ceiling together with the greater part of the balcony to the ground, crushing through layers of glass and metal on its way down.

Dust everywhere, the horrible feeling of disorientation and for seconds, Tony had no clue of what was going on, where the next attack would aim, where that one had even came from.

The sudden exposure to the outside air came with incredible noise. Screeching Chitauri, the deep
roar of their war-beasts, the static frizzling noise of their weapons. 
Screams, terrified screams from the streets below, screams of people who were unable to 
understand why this happened to them – again. 

From one second to another, they were in the center of the battle. 

Right over their heads, a squadron of battleships was hovering, Chitauri streaming out of it like a 
swarm of ravenous insects. 
It was clear they would come here first. 

Seemingly, word had made round who had been the one dropping the nuke right in their lap. 

However, in this moment, tunnel vision usurped Tony's mind. 
The Chitauri would have to wait before they would get their asses kicked – they could practice to 
quite for it while he did the one thing important now: 
He needed to get Pepper out of here. 

“Jarvis, the suit!!” 

In a matter of seconds he scrambled to his feet again, now yelling at his lame A.I. . The leading 
ship was merely two blocks away, coming closer at a steady speed. 
Quickly, he located her a few meters behind him, faster on her high heels than he had been on his 
sneakers. She was holding her wrist, had probably fallen on it and sprained it, but looked 
otherwise unharmed. 

“Pepper?! You have to get out of here!” 

“I'm oka-” 

The sound of bursting concrete cut off her sentence in the middle when the second blast hit the 
tower. 

Whole parts of wall and ceiling came crashing down on the floor, making the solid ground shake 
and rumble and running a physical impossibility. 

Concrete and steel crushing the furniture to pieces, splintering glass everywhere, tubes bursting 
into water fountains. 
Showers of sparks burning his skin, dust making his eyes burn, yet all he was able to see was the 
surprise in Pepper's face when she was buried by debris. 

Everything happened so fast, she was not even able to utter a scream. 

A second later, the abrupt force of metal hit him as the suit assembled around his body, covering 
his face from the world, still torn in an expression of horrified disbelief. 

This was not real. 

His own gasped scream shrilled in his ears, in the narrowness of his helmet, then it died down and 
became nothing but a hoarse, rasping sound. His hand, clawed into a piece of concrete to keep 
himself on his feet, crushed the stone in his fist, then he dashed forward. 

Tearing away pieces of debris as heavy as small cars, he tried to free her - blind to what was 
happening around him, deaf to Natasha's voice asking for him in his headset. 

When the first Chitauri reached him, he hurled around in a rapid movement of unstopped force,
crushing his skull with his fist like it was a watermelon. Sending them flying with repulsor beams, he bought time to salvage her buried body, to undo what had just happened, to retrieve her from a place where she did not belong.

Not yet, not without him.

He was not thinking anything, his mind was blank. He was running on auto-pilot those next 10 minutes, jaws clenched, all muscles tensed, determination forcing his attention to this single task.

When he eventually tore her limp body out of the remains of their home, there were more than a dozen dead Chitauri soldiers spread all over the place.

He did not even look at them.

Cruelly enough, she was recognizable still, her face almost unharmed, covered by thick layers of dust, only streaked by trickles of blood.

It was still her face he stared at while all around him the world fell apart.

4 days later and the city of New York once again was celebrating victory.

Although the array of their troops had seemed endless, even worse than half a year ago, it had been possible to fight the Chitauri back. The battle had been ugly, had cost many good men and women their lives, but also most of the Chitauri warriors. For once, America had been able to learn from its mistakes and the troops had arrived quickly, fought efficiently and had trusted the commands of a certain Captain Steve Rogers.

New York had once again suffered a shot across the bow, yet the Chitauri were gone and the casualties were not above the ordinary numbers.

Tony was drinking, yet not to celebrate.

His memories of the hours following the first attack were hazy, a blurred mixture of wrath and grief, of slaying through hordes of Chitauri, ripping them apart, taking their lives to get hers back.

He had not been fighting as a part of their team, as a member of the Avengers, he had not even really been fighting - just killing. Killing, until there was not a single one of them left in sight, not one on the screens of his HUD. It had been Steve who had been there to stop him afterwards.

In hindsight, he was a poor fellow, for all he got when he finally found Tony were unexplained insults yelled at him, right before the inventor's knees gave in to exhaustion.

It had been three days later when Tony was called to the hospital.

Through all the chaos and the death and the blood everywhere, a phone call was able to reach him, only him. They were calling him to the hospital, because of her. The SHIELD-member who had handed him the phone had looked almost afraid when he had to face him.

Tony had not been present when they had transported her body from the tower to the hospital, but somebody somewhere had told him it had happened when the fight had been in full spate. Like that did change anything.

It was nothing but her body - cold and dead, and not Pepper any longer.
“I don’t want to see her.”, he snapped, but his words sounded lame, tired. His throat was sore and his eyes were burning.

“I’m afraid, I have to be insistent, Mr. Stark. We have information one does not convey via phone.”

Tony was unable to figure out what that meant.

In the background, one heard the crying of children, the agitated yells and screams of a growing crowd of wounded and desperate, waiting to see a doctor. He was feeling sick when he hung up, following the agent to one of SHIELD’s limousines which would escort him everywhere he wanted.

Since there was nothing left of the tower for him to live in, the SHIELD-base had been the one place left to go to.

When he arrived at the New York Presbyterian, his name and rank allowed him to use the back entrance. Still, the suffering was visible, sensible, a nauseating stench in the air, unable to be ignored with the masses of people in the corridors everywhere.

Tony walked straight past them, eyes firmly locked to the ground.

“I am so sorry to have to summon you here for such an occasion, Mr. Stark. Deepest sympathy for your loss.”

The tired, hounded looking doctor was still wearing blood-stained scrubs when he closed the door to his private office behind them. Tony found himself unable to keep his eyes from them, his nervous attempts to evade what would inexorably come out of the man’s mouth any moment growing more and more desperate the longer the man needed to get to the point.

From outside, the noise of nurses yelling all over the hallway, of babies crying and endless talking was still audible, only muted by the office-door. Tony had the feeling those people were more in need of a doctor than he was. He had no idea what could be worse than her death. What could be important enough to call him here?

There had been people bleeding to death right behind the very door they were standing next to and this guy dared to leave the surgery to tell him something. Tony really did not want to know – and yet, anything related to her was worth coming.

“You might want to sit down now.”

“No, thanks.”, he answered, gaze nervously flickering up from the stains into the blood-shot eyes of the man.

He looked compassionate in between all the stress and the horror he probably had faced during the last days. Nobody looked compassionate at Tony Stark. No one.

Tony pressed his lips together, bracing himself for whatever he was about to hear.

“Obligatory autopsy found out that Ms. Potts has been in her 5th week of pregnancy at the time of her death.”

At that point, all following words lost meaning.
“I’m truly sorry, Mr. Stark.”

The rushing of blood blocked out any other sound around him, a painful, needle-sharp tinnitus, heat exploding in his head, making thinking impossible.

“By now the paternity is not definite, but we could test if you would like to.”

Sudden dizziness made him grab for the backrest of the guest chair, hand clawing in the rough fabric until his knuckles turned white.

“Mr. Stark, are you alright?”

He did not even realize that he was expected to answer.

Without his assistance, his feet started moving, bringing him away from this man, away from this office.

This was too much.

This was wrong, things like this did not happen. There was no baby - why was there a baby? There had never been a baby planned.

He needed air, desperately.

Wordlessly, he stumbled towards the door and out of it, into the cramped hallway, passing by dozens of people, running into them without care or a second look.

The throbbing of blood in his head became the only noise by now, the yelling doctor behind him drowned in the racing of his pulse in his ears as he begun walking faster and faster.

Pepper had been pregnant.

Pregnant – the word was echoing in his head in tune with his drumming heart-beat. Pepper had been pregnant and he would have been a father and now, now she was dead.

He made it around the next corner before the whole of his breakfast, lunch and half a bottle of Jack Daniels landed splashing on the hospital tiles.

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Loki listened to the human without disturbing him, his attention occupied by nothing else than the other's voice.

Tony did not look him in the eyes while he spoke.

When he stopped eventually, the silence was almost too loud to bear. The mortal's expression was like stone, unmoved and ashen, his gaze downcast and focused on a undefined point somewhere at the other end of the bed, as if he was ashamed.

He probably was, for his inability to save her, his inability to do the right thing when it was required from him, or his cowardly behavior after everything had been over and the way he had abandoned his comrades to fight alone.

"So, you had everything - and lost it all."
Finally, the dark orbs of Tony's eyes moved and focused on Loki, his glare oozing with anger.

"You asked, I answered. You like that, don't you? Seeing me like that?!"

The mortal's voice was hard and full of disdain, suddenly sounding exactly the way it had when Loki first had arrived on earth to make his offer. Yet it had been far from his actual intention to provoke such a reaction and he could do nothing but answer with a certain sadness in his voice.

"I don't meant to say that. Yet I know how it feels."

"What do you know?!!", Tony spat back, a sudden eruption of vented up anger, the muscles in his neck twitching along with the words.

"More than you might think. I know how it is... to lose something that is more precious to you than anything else in the universe."

"Oh, please tell me more! It was your fault that you got thrown out of Asgard. Thor gave us the story in detail - you won't get a sorry-face from me for that!"

It was easy to deduct that the previous story had set Tony on edge, triggering those harsh words as a protective mechanism to deal with it, to cope with the fact that it had happened. Given a life-span so little in comparison to an Asgardian, mortals often had a hard time with letting things go.

As good as he could understand the other man's feelings of grief, even his unjustified anger, this was enough. He would not let himself be handled like that, not when he was about to tell the mortal something as intimate as what was about to follow.

"Be silent!", Loki hissed back, his patience rapidly fading, "I wasn't talking about something as trivial as reputation in Asgardian society!"

"What are you talking about then, for fuck's sake?!"

"I'm talking about my children, you insolent fool! I have four children myself - and once I had six."

And with that, the human was quiet.

His dark eyes wide open, he stared at Loki, then focused them on the hands in his lap. Then, with a rigid movement, Tony left the bed. He grabbed the clothes from the heater (although they were still wet), put them on clumsily and then fled from the room staggering, almost tripping over the lose leg of his jeans.

The door fell shut with a loud bang, Loki heard the noise of descending footsteps outside.

Then it was silent.

Loki let himself fall back into the sheets and sighed as the tension of their small argument faded from his body and he felt his previously taut muscles go limp again.

It had been the first time for a long while that he had thought of his two dead children, and it had been even longer ago that he had mentioned them towards anyone. He chose to push those memories into the darkest corners of his mind, for the sake of his own sanity. Yet, when Tony had mentioned his unborn offspring, dead in the womb of its deceased mother, it had all come back to him in a flood of buried memories and suppressed emotions.
He had thought that the human would understand if he told him. Seemingly, he had forgotten that Tony, after all, cared about no one but himself.

The mortal returned more than half an hour later, a time in which it had been impossible for Loki to fall back asleep again.

He looked pale and freezing, and, even visible through the twilight of the room, Loki could see that he was shaking.
When the door closed again, and he turned around, their gazes met and they just stared at each other for a few seconds.

It was Tony who spoke first.

“I'm sorry, I should've kept my trap shut. I just, uh... didn't talk about this for a long time... and I had no idea that you...”

His voice trailed off and lost itself in the darkness.

Biting his lower lip, the human stared at him for another few seconds, seconds in which Loki kept his face a cool facade, then he slumped down on his side of the bed.
How he was lying there, he looked as if he was suddenly deprived of any strength left in him.

He pulled his feet - which, how Loki only noticed now, were neither covered in socks nor shoes – up onto the mattress, sitting there in an almost fetal position. His hands were buried in his dark brown hair, fisting into the thick strands as if he wanted to rip it out.

“Fuckfuckfuck”, the mortal mumbled more to himself than to Loki, “I can't handle this. This is just fucked up, and I can't handle this...”

Intuitively, the god already sensed what Tony was about to do.

Before he had a chance to leave the bed again and make his way to the minibar, with the sure aim to drink himself into oblivion, Loki had leaned over to the mortal's side of the bed. With one hand on his upper arm, and one around his waist, he caught him, pulling him back.

There was a second of tension in the other's body, then there was total surrender. If Loki would not hold him in place, he was sure he would just fall back against him.

“Stay here, Tony. The alternative won't help you.”

Loki's words were barely more than a whisper against the line of Tony's neck, the alluring susurration of lies and mischief now the voice of reason.

“We've come so far, do you want to throw all of that away? You can still have your revenge - but only if you stay here now.”

“Revenge still won't bring her back. Nothing can.”

Whatever part of him it was now speaking out of the genius' mouth, Loki would not let it have his victory.
He would not give up what they had already achieved.

“Some things are irreversibly lost. That is how the universe works. And only then...”, a prophetic
undertone steadied his voice, “other things will be in their wake.”

Chapter End Notes

First, we are sorry for everyone who expected smut and got angst instead. We're working on it.

We're also sorry that it took so long to get this chapter off, actually one week later than planned. My friend got a job and I moved to another town and started university (excuses, only excuses D:).

We might go back to one update each week, but I hope it won't come to that ^_^
“Morning, sunshine.”

Tony greeted Loki between two bites of his sandwich, watching as the god sat up in bed and cast him a rather confused look. Perhaps it was strange to be greeted at 6 AM by somebody that awake, already fully clothed and ready to leave, yet, after the time they had spent together, Tony's sleeping habits should have lost their novelty to Loki.

“You did not sleep?”, the god asked, adjusting to the situation quickly by taking the package of raisins from the desk.

“No. Well, yes, probably I have. Dunno. Figured out we head for Kansas City today, I have...”

From the back-pocket of his jeans, he conjured the crumbled piece of paper which was their map.

...“marked the route already. And brought most of the stuff in the car – and I found that kiosk where they sell razorblades and scissors. It'll be open in about half an hour.”

Tony brushed over his beard which was still more Jesus than Gillette, really looking forward to have it removed. How he should cut his hair by himself was another question, but he was sure some solution would come up along the way.

Since Loki's promise of better sleep had not been kept, the inventor had used the time at his disposal to be productive – as productive as you could be without waking the other person. However, he had decided for himself that what had been said and done yesterday night should not be mentioned ever again.

It was probably better for his peace of mind if he would appreciate Loki's openness and understanding more – although he did, he really did! – yet there were only so many emotional breakdowns he wanted to become public in a year.

“You haven't touched the alcohol.”

Loki sounded almost impressed when he said that, his eyebrows raised when he observed Tony's posture, who was sitting on the sideboard which, behind two closed doors, contained the minibar, leaning his back against the wall while his legs were dangling freely.

The genius cracked a grin, knocking twice against the wood he was sitting on.

“Far from eye, far from mind.”

 Somehow, this was sufficient to come to a mutual agreement that things were settled again. They could both not allow themselves to bear a grudge against the other, both for different reasons, yet sharing the most important one:

Without the other, they would be alone.

It took them not too long to finish their quick breakfast, bring the remaining baggage to the car (surely nobody would mind the absence of two bottles of shampoo and a few towels) and drive to
the aforementioned kiosk.

As it turned out, shaving with a disposable razor while having only the side mirror as an affirmation of one's work, was pretty fucking difficult.

“Could you for one second NOT drive over a bump?”, Tony griped, fingers wet from shaving foam and water out of one of the plastic bottles. Even though his hands had acquired their former steadiness again, the most basic approach of his usual trim would have to do now.

“I have no influence on the street's surface and you know that.”, Loki answered with a sly smirk, obviously amused by his attempt on shaving inside the car.

Now and then, the god was throwing a glance over to him (probably waiting for the inevitable slipping of Tony's hand), hardly visible behind his sunglasses. The cheap plastic-models they had taken with them from the kiosk had proven to be a good idea, since the desert ground was still reflecting the sun-light - even though winter was drawing in - making Tony squint his eyes every time he looked out of the windshield.

“Talk is cheap. You're as smooth as a mannequin.”

They were close to the border of Utah by now, Colorado not far ahead.

While Tony had been driving in the beginning, they had changed positions again, so that he had time no to take care of something as vain as his appearance. With the radio playing the best country songs of the century – Loki seemed to have a knack for finding the strangest stations only – and the sun standing on her highest point already, the world felt a bit more alright again than last night.

“I swear, one more unnecessary bump and we have accidental Hitler over here.”

Loki's smirk could not spring from an understanding of his reference, yet it only gave Tony another reason to introduce him to some more trivia about the human race.

They were talking a lot during this ride, somehow more than they had before. Perhaps it was because of their conversation yesterday, but Tony felt the need to get to know the other better – and to make him know humanity better. They had exchanged some stories before, about Asgardian traditions or strange human behavior Tony had never realized as strange. With the insight Loki offered into every topic, his sophisticated thoughts on almost everything which always came with a slightly cynical undertone, the genius once more wished that an encounter under different circumstances would have been possible.

However, it was not, so they had to take what they were left with.

“That's more like it...”, Tony eventually said when he was done with shaving (and with explaining Central Europe's history of the 20th century), toweling his face and observing himself in the mirror.

“Definitely better.”, Loki condescended to agree, “yet the hair is still terrible.”

"That's the right one speaking.”, Tony responded with a smirk and Loki merely shook his head in mild amusement, yet the god had to know that he was right. The other's hair had grown awfully long and, what was worse, reminded more and more of a disheveled black birds nest. Over two years of barely any care or cutting eventually became noticeable – even if you were a oh-
so-perfect Norse god.

"You know what?", Loki suddenly interrupted his thoughts,"I'll pull over and we see what can be done with these scissors I saw in the first aid kit."

Half and hour and two (surprisingly fashionable) haircuts later, they were back on the street, rushing towards their next stop.

The god seemed to have a hard time keeping himself from touching his much shorter hair which barely reached further than his shoulders.
Tony looked differently, too. There was a reason you paid several 100$ to a hairstylist, yet this one was much more like the haircut he usually had.
Thinking about it was strange, the fact that such things suddenly started to bother him again to a point beyond the question whether he was dressed and could go into public without being arrested.

Sure, this should probably be counted as a positive development – problem was: looking more like his old self again made him look like... well, like one of the widest known persons in the USA. His only hope was that where they were going, they would not find enough people to notice - people had graver concerns than a runaway, alcoholic ex-billionaire.

Yet, there still was a risk.

It was a task of impossibility to drive the entire way from Escalate to Kansas City without a break, even with two drivers at disposal who could switch every few hours. Sleeping in the car might have been possible, but more than a few in-between naps were hardly possible: Tony's neck was killing him and his back was aching from the constant deranged sitting on the passenger's seat.

After nearly 30 hours of endless driving - apart from a few coerced stops on gas stations – they left the highway and headed for smaller roads, later gravel paths, until they finally stopped at the edge of a light forest and parked the car half-hidden behind some of the trees.

One did not need to feel the cold on one's skind to know that the coming winter was here more than apparent.
To the greatest amount, the trees were rid of any leaves and the air was cold, cold enough to create small puffs of vapor in front of Tony's mouth when he left the car. A strong wind rushed through the high brown grass, making him shiver.

The nightly sky above was clear and starry, except for a few clouds high above in the atmosphere.

“Inviting.”

Tony was not completely satisfied. For a few moments, he kept looking around and then turned around and started rummaging in the car, dragging out everything of blankets and towels they had gotten their fingers on.

“A real camping trip. Never had those as a child, but somehow I'm sure I didn't miss much. Just needs Marshmallows. Do we have Marshmallows?”

For the next few minutes, Tony was still chatting while Loki was already arranging a few stones on a speck of plain ground to make a fire, appearing like he had the construction manual for campfires memorized by heart.
Tony meanwhile looked after the more important matters: he fetched all of the food he could find from every corner of the car, putting it near the fire place when he was done.
“Do you even know how to make a fire?”

At that question, Loki rose his head and looked at him with a cocked eyebrow.

“Oh, alright, stupid question.”

“I think you can hardly imagine how many times I've done this before.”

When the god finally answered, these were his first words since over half an hour.

In a matter of seconds, the small fire was burning, so they could finally sit down close to it, the car shielding them against the wind coming from.

Tony wrapped himself in several blankets, face and his lower right arm the only thing exposed to the cold night air, while Loki laid outstretched in the grass without any cover.

They were silent for a few moments, the only noises the crackling of the fire, the low whistle of wind in dry leaves and single animal noises from further away.

Tony really did not know whether he should feel like in the beginning of a trashy Horror flick or some over-romanticized adventure movie.

“What are you laughing about?”, Loki asked, sat up and looked at him when he could not help but chuckle.

“Just look at us two. It's just the tiniest bit of... weird. I mean, imagine someone had told me one year ago I would be sitting here today, on a camping fire, and eating chocolate-chips with the God of Mischief.”

Now, Loki also laughed.

“Well, I'm always good for surprises.”

Slowly, the warmth of the campfire started crawling up his feet, then his legs, heating his whole body after some time.

It was still cold enough to need an additional blanket and the thought alone that it would only get colder with every day they were was making him feel like he was becoming ill already.

He hated winter – there was a reason to buy a house in Malibu.

Yet, he would look at the bright side of all of this. It was the only solution left which would prevent him from getting back into that car and drive back the 80 miles to the last gas station to get hammered.

“Why did no one of us think of a tent?”, he eventually asked, more to himself, taking the last donut from the box.

Loki who was opposite of him, had leaned against one of the trees. He looked perfectly calm, his eyes closed, yet one could see he was not sleeping, but listening to whatever the forest was whispering to him - Tony still had not really figured out how the god even worked.

Sometimes he was almost human, sometimes you felt like he could read minds and tell you whether it would rain in three days by laying his ear on the ground.

“I find it quite peaceful, but we will get one, if necessary.”

“We'll probably have a roof over our heads next time we make a stop again.”

“You insist on a hotel?”
“There'll be not that many hotels anymore. The further East we come, the less likely becomes the possibility to find tourists. Just those crazy, tornado-chaser-like weirdos.”

Tony had seen the abandoned landscapes on the TV-screen, the endless repetition of the same footage. Whole cities bereft of their inhabitants after the great panic had gained around, strong enough to make you leave the house you lived in.

There was plenty of property on sale where they were going – it was just that nobody would ever buy it.

“I'll finish the suit when we're there...”, Tony went on and, quieter now, added: “and I'll enable you to access the Tesseract.”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

Loki really sounded like it, a smile playing on his lips when he answered.

His eyes did not open when he spoke and Tony found himself watching the always changing illuminations of the fire dancing across his shadowy features.

Now, with his shorter hair, he looked even more like his usual self – only that he just was not. At least, not to Tony.

Maybe it was the other way around: that what they had encountered when Loki had attacked the earth had not been his usual self. Somehow, with every day he spent in Loki's presence, this explanation made more sense to him.

“Hey, flowerchild.”, Tony consciously destroyed the atmosphere, scattering the crumbs from his fingers in the flames to watch them burn out, “Do you Norse folks know 'Never have I ever'?”

Now, Loki's eyes opened and he looked over to Tony through the fire. There was at least a hint of curiosity in his look and the genius quickly went on explaining.

“It's usually a drinking game, but - for obvious reasons - we have to go without the booze today.”

A small smile crept on Loki's lips.

“It's always games with you, Tony, isn't it?”

“Pretty much sums it up, yeah.”

They shot each other a grin, then Loki sat up straight again, bending a bit forward to be closer. The fire was still crackling between them, filling the space around them in a warm orange glow. Behind that, towards the trees, everything went black.

They were so completely alone here, it felt more like they were in a small room than actually out in the open.

“Right, so we gonna take those... potted... olives?!”, Tony read from one of the cans, making a face, “Geez, who even bought these? Anyway, there must be some kind of punishment after all.”

He quickly explained the rules, which were utterly simple, and then made a start.

“Never have I ever asked somebody to marry me.”

Despite the fact that he really liked it and it was good to lift the mood, this game had some other functions.

Firstly, it was a great way to kill time – with no books and nothing to do, he needed something to calm down before he would get tired.
And secondly... it could not hurt to know Loki better.

Loki only smiled at him, then bent forward to pick one of the olives from the package and put it in his mouth, grinning at Tony's stunned, open-mouthed expression.

"Don't taste that bad... Soo... Never have I ever had sex in public."

Well, that surely was straight to the point.

"Do I have to eat three now...?", Tony grinned cockily at Loki, but then just took one olive from the can - he could just not stand the taste.

Seemingly, the god had found out pretty quickly what this game was was, mostly, all about. Turned out Tony had probably been wrong with the assumption that those games were not as common in Asgard as they were on earth.

Yet, why should he think that - it was a known fact that Aesir liked to have a drop too much.

"Okay. Never have I ever stolen food... oh, wait, I did. With you. Shit."

Tony just chuckled at his mistake and voluntarily ate another olive, before he went on.

"Never have I ever burned down a house - entirely, I mean."

"Are you doing this on purpose?"

Loki took the next olive, sucking on it to taste the salty sauce before he bit down on the small fruit with delight.

"Sure I am, don't want to eat this shit all alone."

The god only chuckled dryly at the comment, then went on with the game.

"Hmm... Never have I ever yelled at my mother."

Tony squinted his eyes, looking the god dead in the eye for a few moments.

"You're kidding."

Without taking his eyes off him, he took one of the olives. By now, he was not even grimacing any more when biting down on it. This slowly became really interesting...

"So, you're mommy's little boy? Well, let me tell you what: Never have I ever been told a Bedtime-story by my mum. Or my dad, if you want to be precise."

"Sad to hear that. I have to pass in both points."

As obliged, Loki took two of the olives. The can was getting emptier with rapid speed, yet there was still more than half of the fruits left inside.

"You know, I did so many things in my life that it is rather difficult to think of something I didn't do. Ah, wait, I got something. Never have I ever not enjoyed eating olives."

"Fuck you."

Tony pretended to ignore the satisfied smirk on Loki's lips when he had to take another olive.
"Okay, a real one, though. Never have I ever had sex with animals."

There was a short moment of silence in which a thoughtful expression emerged on Loki's face. Tony would rather not have seen there. Then, dead-pan, without batting an eyelash, the god answered.

"Define the term 'animals'."

Tony nearly choked on his spit, but that was merely the beginning.

Although this was the first time ever in his life he had played this game without the influence of alcohol (or with just one other participant), this was probably the most revealing one.

During the course of the next hour or so, some truths came to be known which should better have been kept hidden. From sex in various places and with various partners of various races, genders or species to less scandalous things like wrecking a car, waking up somewhere without knowing how you got there, getting lost in the wood or puking in front of a large crowd of people, they both found out they had done pretty much everything one asked during this game.

Considering the huge difference in their life-span, Tony felt at least a little bit of his pride swell up.

"Wow, this is becoming harder with every question... Never have I ever... jumped off a bridge."

Where seconds before a wide grin had flashed in Loki's face, something in his eyes suddenly died. Tony, even though half distracted by checking if there even were still olives in the can, stopped his movements and looked over to the other.

Intuitively, he knew he had probably hit a nerve there - a suspicion which got confirmed when Loki did not answer.

"We're out of olives. Your lucky day."

It was lame, but hopefully, Loki would get the intention behind it. Something in the god's face had hardened and where the flames had seemed lively on his features before, they now seemed to dance on a motionless marble statue.

"Yes.", Loki responded after some time, "they started to taste awful anyway."

He looked somewhat relieved, although this merely added another point to the growing list of "stuff he would love to ask Loki about but did not because he actually wanted to stay alive a little longer".

They had told each other a lot - during their captivity, in the motel, as well as later in the car and here on the camping fire, yet the other's history was still nothing but a huge black incertainty to Tony.

Anyway, it had its reason that they had chosen to make a break and slow their schedule for more than half a day.

"I think we should sleep now. It's already late and we need the time."

Tony merely hummed in agreement, then rummaged through the several layers of blankets and towels he used to keep himself warm and lied down, his back facing the fire.

There was silence around them, the crackling fire and the noises of the forest the only interruptions. Involuntarily, Tony found himself listening, waiting to Loki to move and lie down as well. Eventually, he heard the last charred twigs broke down into the ash and the light vanished almost
entirely, except for the faint orange glow of the coal.

"You sure you'll be able to sleep tonight?"

Loki's voice suddenly broke through the nocturnal quietness. Seemingly, one could guess that he was still awake from the sight of his back only.

"I'll manage.", the inventor assured, when a thought struck his mind and he sat up again, "But what about you? I'd be freezing if I were you. Or do Asgardians not feel the cold?"

Tony's eyes focused on the towel the god was lying on, although it was hard to make out much in the almost total darkness around them. The stars above were by far the brightest source of light.

"Yes, it's fine. I don't feel the cold."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Good, then it's fair I don't have a bad conscience because I took all the blankets."

With that, Tony slumbed back down, moving around until he was in his previous position. A low rustle of grass on fabric, and he knew Loki also had lied down.

"Good night, Loki."

Tony was waken by the cold breeze, telling him that he had spent the remaining weeks of summer in a dirty cellar and that now, it was definitely autumn. It also told him that he was not at all used to sleeping outside, for he found half of the blankets a few feet beside him, crumbled together in a heap of fabric at the side of the burned down fireplace.

He shivered and then sat up, rubbing his stiffened, cold limbs in a clumsy attempt to get his blood pumping again.

It was beginning to dawn when he looked East and Loki was still sleeping. The inventor let him be, glad for the few minutes of alone time which he spent hopping up and down on the spot a few times to get his circulation going again. Eventually, he felt like he was able to move again.

When he bent down to gather the blankets and towels and what else was scattered all over the place, he looked over to Loki another time and their eyes met.

"I need a coffee. Hot. Boiling hot."

"A good morning to you, too."

That was enough talk for Tony now. He really was no morning person and this condition even strengthened on those days when he found himself waking up freezing cold in the middle of nowhere. Loki was a damn tough cookie, the way he was able to stand up in a fluent motion, even gracefully, now, after a night outside in the cold.

While he squashed their belongings on the backseat of the car, he wondered whether this was a general Aesir thing - probably - or whether this was something different. After all, Loki's touch had
always been cold, contrary to his assurance that he did not mind the temperature. Thor on the other hand had always radiated heat, even when he was neither in battle nor excited in any other ways.

There was no real relation between them, sure, but... okay, this led too far. These were post-caffeine-thoughts.

Since he was in no way in the mood to talk Loki into something, Tony just forewent the talking and directly slumped down on the driver's seat, waiting for the other to follow. When the car door fell shut, the genius started the SUV which came alive with a deep roar, and brought them back on the street again, heading for the next gas station.

"The gas tank is full...", Loki objected, but Tony interrupted him with a raised forefinger.

"No talking."

Two paper cups of black coffee later and Tony did not even mind that he had burned his tongue three times on the stuff.

The road signs were announcing barely 80 miles to Kansas City now and he caught himself humming along to the Les Humphries Singers in his head, the radio quietly telling the news. His mood had increased again, yet the more street signs he read, the more he felt like a dark shadow was slowly covering them.

Not long and they would travel on abandoned ground - for now, it did not really feel like that at all, but it would happen.

Tony was clever enough to know that the first signs of the catastrophe would not be long in coming.

Chapter End Notes

So we noticed that we can't keep up with the promise of two chapters each week, from now on, updates will be coming irregular and whenever we have something finished. It will probably be once a week, sometimes sooner, sometimes later.

This chapter wasn't planned, but just happened. We thought it would be nice to give them a little break and some bonding time before the story becomes darker again. I know that the hair-cutting scenario is some kind of thing in this ship, or at least I've read it several times already and therefore decided to skip more detailed descriptions.
Threats

Chapter Summary

Coming closer and closer to the East Coast, paths cross and loyalties are tested.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The endless hours spent behind the steering-wheel or on the passenger's seat became more agonizing and tiring with every mile they passed. Loki might have enjoyed the ride at first, but after several days spent inside this metallic box, with barely any room to move, only a few breaks and nothing more than the dull, ever so slowly changing landscape outside, he felt like in a moving prison.

His whole body was stiff from constant sitting, the dry air coming from the air conditioner smelled artificial and unpleasant and, secretly, he wished back to the times he had traveled the Nine Realms by horse.

It might have been much slower, yet so much more interesting than moving with something giving you the impression that you did not pass any distance at all.

Consequently, he was more than relieved when Tony announced – with a look on the map after two days of driving – that they would reach Kansas City within the next half hour. Indeed: they spotted the first gray towers in the distance soon after, cloaked in a cloud of city haze. It would be their last longer stop and their last night in a hotel - before they would enter the abandoned area close to the East Coast.

Admittedly, Loki did not really know what to expect. Tony had told him the humans had left the area due to the Chitauri-Attacks, forced to abandon everything, but the god sensed that there was more to it than the aliens alone. There was another reason for the humans to flee, one that had not been mentioned yet. He would have to ask Tony later...

Something at the side of the road tore Loki away from his thoughts and made him drive a little bit slower – there were no cars behind them anyway. The streets were completely empty, even that close to the city. What had caught his attention looked like an array of white tents, first only a few of them, but the closer they drove, he saw that it was far more than that. Dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands.

An entire city made out of tents.

Here and there some cheaply built-together hut of thin metal and wood, yet mostly tents. One could see that their inhabitants made a certain effort to keep everything clean. Most of the tents were still unsoiled, probably only due to the rather dry weather which kept the trampled soil firm. Nevertheless, there were heaps of garbage piling up in the narrow space between the tents.

And in between – humans.
Old as well as young, women and men of every ethnicity, sitting in front of the tents or around fires, waiting in front of large transportation cars. Loki could see only a few of them from his position on the highway that lead right through the tent-city – only separated by a thin fence – but from his guess, there were probably a few thousand people in there, if not more.

Loki had never seen anything alike, not in his entire, very long and very eventful life.

“What is this?”, he asked, not hiding his astonishment.

“A refugee camp. Those are the people that lived on the East Coast who had to leave and didn’t have any chance to move to relatives somewhere else, buy a house, rent a flat.”, Tony explained, his gaze roaming over the sad scenery outside.

“They’ll be lucky if they make it all through the winter.”, he added after a short moment of silence, averting his gaze to look at the hands in his lap instead.

Loki did not exactly know what to make of that gesture. Somehow, he had the feeling that the human had not realized yet that there were people who had met a far worse fate than he had. People that lost everything: their houses, their goods and their beloved ones. And still - he was the only one sitting in a car to the East Coast, with a plan to return the favor of utter annihilation to the Chitauri.

“I had never guessed that there were so... many.”, Loki eventually said into the quietness that was only interrupted by the deep hum of the engine.

Tony looked up, this time directly staring at the god.

“Those are only a small part, really... Millions died. Then there were millions evacuated or those who escaped by themselves. You can probably guess how much money and space it takes to keep them all alive under relatively humane conditions.”

Again, Loki stared at the passing camp, wondering how many humans had to spent their lives there, how many had suffered under the attacks. Truth be told, he had not known how many inhabitants the planet actually held - but from everything he had heart so far, it was far more than what he had ever expected.

Still, despite their incredible numbers, they had proved to be incapable of defending their homeworld.

The mood immediately increased once they had left the camps and its wrecked looking inhabitants behind and entered the suburban area. A few minutes later, they reached the central district of the city. Here, it was you found signs of what was going on only a few miles further away on every corner.

Finding a hotel room proved to be more than difficult than expected. Most of them were taken by people who had enough money to rent permanently and used them as their temporary home – in the vain hope there would be a return to their old lives. Yet, it also had its good side. The people were far to busy with their own problems to pay attention to two strange travelers. From time to time, Loki noticed a few knowing glances thrown at Tony, yet no one said something or made any visible move.

After three hours of searching, they had found themselves a small hotel room and two bags full of
food as well as several packs of clean water. It had consumed nearly all of their money, but there were no stores left where they would be buying something anyway.

Nighttime went by without any events and in the early morning hours, before dawn, they departed, having left the city far behind at the time the sun rose.

Neither of them spoke, except for basic demands like for a bottle of water or a chocolate bar, depending on who was driving. Both men were lost in their thoughts, thinking about what they had just seen the previous day and what they were probably going to see, now where they got closer to their aim.

It was during the hours of early evening – the sky covered with gray autumn clouds that kept any sunlight from shining through – when the road led them right back into another town.

It was different than the ones Loki had seen before. It looked older, many buildings were made out of stone and lacked the look as if they had been build in a matter of days. Here and there one could even spot a adorned front.
Yet, they also were not even approximately as high as the ones he had seen back in New York or Kansas City.

However, there was something else that was definitely off. Something else, apart from the different appearance. Loki could not pinpoint exactly what it was, until Tony said it.

“No cars.”

Now, after it had been mentioned, Loki saw it too. The streets were empty, not a single car around, neither in front of the several buildings nor the occasional parking lots. Nowhere.
Upon paying further attention, one could see that there also was no trace of any humans, no lights in the windows, no one walking the streets.

Again, Tony was the one who spoke out the next obvious conclusion.

“It's abandoned.”

They were both silent for a while, quietly driving through the town, the realization about what they had just discovered hanging heavily between them.

Tony had told Loki that it would take some time, maybe over a day of driving, until they would enter the deserted area. Quite obviously, he had underestimated the situation.
The influence of whatever lurked in said area reached much further than anticipated and far beyond any created borders.

“It's probably a good chance to get some free food... and a roof over our head.”, Tony said after a while.
He threw Loki a meaningful glance, then he pulled over and parked the car between two buildings, hidden from direct view.

The strange atmosphere was even more ominous outside the car.
In all honesty, Loki did not really look forward to spend the night here, in one of those empty, dead-looking buildings.
He would always prefer a night outside, in the wilderness, where the risk of being discovered might have been higher, yet the haze of slow decay did not loom over everything.
Yet, he nights were chilly and were getting colder with every passed day and he knew Tony was right. It was the best place for a short break in the warmth they were going to get and they could not allow themselves to be picky.

“We meet here in half an hour. Look for food and medical supplies, okay?”

“Do you think it's a good idea to split up? You don't know what to expect here... I don't like this place.”

Loki held his voice low while he was speaking as if there might be someone listening. Of course there was no one, not even animals, but the utter lack of any living creature around made him nervous.

Tony seemed to consider his concern, yet waved it off with a gesture of his hand.

“Nah, it'll be fine. We're the only ones here. Don't go too far and everything'll be fine and dandy.”

“I'm not concerned about me, Tony. I'm concerned about you.”, Loki responded, yet it only earned him a tired smile from the human.

“Really, it's fine. I won't get kidnapped by aliens.”

With that, the issue seemed to be settled for Tony and he walked of, eventually vanishing between two buildings.

Loki watched the human until he lost sight of him. There was a certain worry and anticipation keeping him from simply turning around and doing as told. He even considered to follow Tony, but in the end decided against it.

Finally, he left to head into the other direction.

After a few minutes, Loki had to realize that they were not the only ones that had come here with the intention of finding supplies.

Upon further inspection, he saw that a lot of doors had been forcefully opened, and were only loosely hanging in their holders. Windows as well which were ripped out of the frames or shattered, exposing the inside of the houses to the elements.

The god slipped into a few buildings and inspected each corner and drawer that might hold something with constantly decreasing motivation.

The sight he got was always the same.

Buildings wiped empty, still intact and - beside the dust - clean, yet the only things remaining inside were the furniture. Everything that could have been edible had apparently been taken away by others long ago, as well as the usual array of electric tools one could find in a mortal's home.

When Loki left the fifth house, it had become distinctly darker outside.

The silence hung heavy in the air, only interrupted by the occasional rustle of fallen leaves on the asphalt. Not even his own steps were audible and he kept himself from making too much noise as he passed over the streets and through the alleys between the buildings.

Yet, something stopped him from walking further, some faint feeling which sent a unpleasant tingling sensation down his spine, just when he passed a rather narrow side street between two buildings.

Right in front if him, the alley opened to a wide plaza, wider than the streets he had previously
pass.

Its ground was covered with stones, just like the rest of the town, and it was surrounded by high buildings to each side. Loki guessed that it represented the city center. The place was entirely empty, as if there had never existed any life here before. All movement seemed to have ceased around him, even the wind had stopped whirling around the leaves.

It was too quiet. Loki felt a alerted, no, he sensed that something was not right, that there was danger advancing. He did not dare to step out of the alley, just kept gazing around to find out what it was.

He knew that there had to be something.

A speck of color was the first thing he spotted, glistering, dark red against the gray of the stones - almost as striking as fresh blood on snow. It was the only thing around which did not seem to have been deprived of any color. Then he made out sleek lines, polished metal, and dark glass.

It was a car, the only one in the entire city.

Definitely not of the kind one would leave behind just like that. The only reason he had not noticed it before was that it was hidden in the shadow of one of the buildings. Or, more adequate: it had been hidden by someone. Almost instinctively, Loki’s gaze went up to said building, just to catch the last glimpse of movement up there.

Damn.

They had run straight into a trap! He had run straight into a trap, as if he was nothing but a naive child. He had even made the mistake to allow Tony his will and be separated from him. Loki could only hope that it was not too late for an escape, that whoever had followed them here had not found the mortal yet.

Slowly at first, Loki walked backwards, descending back into the darkness of the alley, before he turned around and started running.

-----

Admittedly, Tony had assumed the examination of an abandoned city much less frustrating. Yes, finding some place to sleep was no longer an issue - hell, he already had problems to choose which bed he found looking most cozy – but the food-situation was terrible.

He had been walking through the empty streets for a while now, always expecting something or someone to jump out of a dark corner or tackle him from behind. Every tiny noise which was not caused by his own walking feet seemed suspicious at first, but after over half an hour, he decided to relax.

There was no one here. The people who had lived here surely would know better than to return and the pillagers had already done their work.

Consequently, there was no chance he could have foreseen the ambush.

The ever so silent tapping of a feet on the ground behind him, then, before he could turn around, a hard grip on his wrist, twisting his arm up his back in a fluid, brute movement. His mouth opened to utter a pained gasp, yet the noise was muffled by a hand.
A bold push and he was shoved against the nearest wall, all air pressed out of his lungs.

The whole procedure had not taken longer than three seconds.

He did not need her to speak to know who had just manhandled him like he was nothing more than a lousy amateur.
A few stray strands of red hair waving in the periphery of his field of vision, her unique smell which combined both the harsh scent of her uniform and that magnificent perfume she always wore and its name he had never found out.

“I will let go off you now, Stark. Be aware that you have no chance to defend yourself.”

Of course - out of all people, he would be found by Natasha first.

“Would be a pleasure.”, Tony muttered his muffled agreement against her hand, radiating the impression that he was neither surprised nor intimidated where in fact his heart had skipped more than one beat.

The assassin took a step back and released him from his unpleasant position, so that he could finally turn around and look at her, casually rubbing his hurting wrist.

She looked like always: the same posture of relaxed power and cunning, the same amazing catsuit, the same impossibility to read from her face. Perhaps her hair had grown a bit longer – he could never tell.
Only that now, she did not return his disarming grin with a polite smile or an amused smirk, but merely pinned him to his place with her eyes.

“Is this the point where I say 'This town ain't big enough for both of us.' and then the 'Once Upon A Time In The West'-theme starts playing?”

“I have a direct order to kill you if necessary.”

This was going to be no fun.

Subtly, yet probably not subtly enough, Tony quickly let his gaze travel over their surroundings. He was expecting SHIELD agents in the corners, machine-guns pointed at him, red dots all over his forehead.
However, he saw nothing of this.

Just Natasha alone. Either they were underestimating the recent developments of his precipitate disappearance or they were very, very sure on how to handle him. He hoped for the first, yet the whole thing smelled funny.

“Since I'm still alive, it probably has not become necessary yet.”, Tony commented, watching her intently.

It was strange, talking to her like that.
They had some history with each other, a not exactly minor part of it consisting of distrust, yet she had proved trustworthy when it mattered. Despite the fact that she worked for Fury and that his opinions often described the diametrical opposite of his own, a mutual sympathy had developed between the Director's favorite assassin and Tony.

Now, although it was still there, lingering in the tensed air between them, he knew that she would kill him without batting an eye.
She was too much of a professional to give in to compassion if it was for a higher cause.
So, he was forced to be professional, too.

Problem was: the suit, although in close proximity, would need longer to assemble than it took her to fire her gun (or just snap his neck, for that matter). Also, it would have to break through the reinforced metal trunk-lid of the SUV.

“It is needless to say that your escape has triggered some very emotional response at SHIELD. There are more than enough people opting for your death as the less complicated way to solve the problems you have caused.”

Tony merely chuckled when he heard that. Never in his life had he cared about the good night’s sleep of the authorities, so he would definitely not start with it yet – and he knew, that Natasha knew that, too.

“Flattering that you think me worthy of being caught alive, then.”, the inventor answered, crossing his arms in front of his chest, “I just thought you'd know me better than to assume that I would crawl back and kiss Fury's feet, begging him to have mercy on my soul.”

A cold breeze let some papers and trash float through the street they were in, its sudden noise only strengthening the overwhelming fact that they were utterly alone here.

Except for Loki – who the fuck was the god when one needed him?!

-----

It had taken days for Natasha and Clint to find their targets.

They had almost lost them, several times, had almost be forced to give up on their mission - if not for Stark's and Loki's appearance in Kansas City. SHIELD's more or less legitimate sources had instantly provided them with the necessary information and they had been on their way, following close behind.

The remaining part had been easy:
After following their pattern of movement, it had become obvious that the two of them were heading for the East Coast, most likely New York. There was only one remaining street that lead there from Kansas City, and that one street lead through one town.

Admittedly, it had been kind of a poker game to guess right if Stark and Loki were going to stop there, otherwise Natasha and Clint would have lacked the advantage of ambush.
However, to their luck, Stark been incapable - as predicted – to resist the temptation of a night within four walls and free food.

And now he was here, at her mercy, and she knew him well enough to sense his fear. It was, as always, well hidden under layers of sarcasm and jokes, but the distinct look in his eyes, the way they darted to the side for just one millisecond, told enough.

He knew he had no chance, because he was alone.

Loki had wandered off, into the other direction where Clint would have an eye on him, if everything went according to plan.

It would give her enough time to solve this whole ordeal in a way that would not include killing someone who might still be a more than valuable figure on the field.

"I know you well enough, Stark.", Natasha finally answered, here red lips quirking into the faintest
"I know why you are here, what you are about to do. Even without you telling me. Everyone knows, since you ran off with him."

The inventor was silent now, brown eyes staring at her, filled with disdain, but also curiosity.

"I also know that you will die if you continue with the plan you're currently following with so much eagerness. Either through me, another agent, a Chitauri, or who knows, maybe even through Loki. What I also know is that Loki made you an offering to work for him - so I'm going to give you a better one."

At that, a dry laughter escaped Stark, barely a chuckle, yet enough to have the skin around his eyes wrinkle from the movement. Then, it abruptly stopped and he was staring at her with a challenging look.

Definitely, something had changed about him since the last time she had seen him. Yet, their last encounter was already over half a year ago, at Pepper's funeral. The dull tiredness in his eyes was gone, the unbearable apathy replaced by anger and strong determination. She had rarely seen him like that, even during his good days.

For a short moment, she doubted that she could persuade him.

"I'm all ears.", the engineer responded mocking, his stance more relaxed now that he knew she was not going to kill him.
At least not right away.

"We will offer you to work with SHIELD. You will have every equipment you need, you will have support through SHIELD soldiers and scientists. You would work with the Tesseract. You would take a great part in securing the Earth from the Chitauri. We're working to a common goal, Stark, but you know that the way you approach it is a suicide mission. Also, we would forget about the helicopter and what you did to Adams... or Steve."

Stark was looking at her with an interested expression, yet she could tell he was not convinced. It was that moment when she suddenly heard Clint's voice in her ear via speakerphone, the tiny device hidden under her hair and too quite to be heard by anyone but her.

"Loki saw me, I think he's on his way to you. At least he ran of into that direction. Watch out."

Only years upon years of training and a huge of amount of inherent self-control kept her from cursing loud about the change of events. On the outside, her face did not even twitch and she kept perfectly calm when Stark spoke.

"All that for free? Sounds too good for me. Let me guess: you want Loki out of the game in exchange for it, and - I'd bet my ass on this one - the Tesseract under your control."

"You got it, Stark.", was everything she answered, earning herself another chuckle from the man.

She knew that Stark was well aware that half of what came from her mouth were lies anyway – but the offering, as unrealistic as it might have sounded, was only meant as a warmup for the real matter at hand – only meant to give a vague impression of what could be possible.

Sweet honey before the bitter poison. but apparently, the inventor did not even want that.

"You know as well as me that this offer is an insult."
The assassin squinted her eyes, her head shaking ever so slightly, and she felt almost sorry for the foolishness of the decision he was making. Yet, she had not expected anything else.

“You can tip the Big Boss off that when he is unable to deal with the shit going on, then I will. Alone, if that is what it takes – but I’m not alone. Tell me one reason why I should return to you sad clowns when the terms and conditions are so much better with the competition?!”

The look in his eyes as he made his bratty announcement told her that he really believed this to be the truth - it probably was the only truth he could rely on any longer, the only thing that kept him from going mad.

Natasha had no pity for him, not for his loss, nor his months spent in isolation with alcohol as the only friend left. Not even for his misplaced trust in Loki, the God of Lies. She could not allow herself to feel any empathy for her target-person, and Stark had never been an issue for her.

Her voice was cold and deprived of any emotion when she answered him:

“I'm sad to hear that. But I will give you your reason.”

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The loud beating of his heart was the only thing Loki heard as he passed through the streets, back into the direction of the car to look for Tony.

He could only estimate who it was that had followed them, but he knew that the mortal's life was in acute danger. If he was not already dead.

However, this was an outcome he did not want to waste too much of his thoughts on. It would be disastrous - he needed Tony, because without him, everything they had archived so far had been for vain.

Also, a strange kind of worry mixed into his thoughts, not only worry for their quest, but also for Tony himself. Loki had to admit that there was something akin to friendship connecting them and he did not want to lose it right after it had started to flower.

Invisibility cloaked itself around Loki as he was running. He had only caught a short glimpse of the person on the roof, yet he did not need to see them to know that they had a long-range weapon. The god would not let himself be stopped by something like that, not when there was so much was at stake.

In a matter of a two minutes, Loki had reached the spot where they had parked their car, but, as expected, there was no trace of Tony.

The god stood still for a moment, listening, holding his breath, but the only thing he heard was the wind that roamed through the streets. His gaze traveled over the street and up to the looming houses, but this time, he did not spot anything.

Tony was not here then, and nobody else was, so Loki headed off into the direction where he had seen the human going.

He was not running anymore, but his feet were carrying him quietly through the deserted streets, along red brick-stone walls and plain asphalt.

The tension had not faded from his body yet, although he himself was not in direct danger, not with the invisibility spell hiding him from mortal eyes. He had to know that Tony was safe before his
heart would settle back to its usual pace.

Voices coming out of an alley made the god stop in his tracks.

He turned around, walking closer to the source of the noise without making a sound himself, to find out whose voices he was hearing. To hear Tony's voice along with another one confirmed his worst expectations – well, not his worst. The worst would have been the mortal lying dead in a puddle of his own blood, between the huge roll-out containers that were lined along the walls.

Yet, there he was, standing upright and alive, facing no other than Agent Romanov.

In fact, Loki was not overly surprised to see her. He had expected that SHIELD would attempt to follow them, although not that they would find them so soon.

Now, that Tony's life was obviously not ending in the next five seconds, what was going on in front of him became way too interesting to waste any more thoughts on the hows. Apparently he had just come at the right time.

Loki stepped closer and listened.

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“I will give you a good reason – maybe not good enough for you, considering your recent lifestyle, but good enough for every man who holds value to his life. If you won't cooperate, we will simply kill you. Quietly, without much fuss, without anyone noticing.

We'll get Loki, and the Tesseract, even without your help. The only thing you can influence in this whole matter is whether you will die a rather unspectacular and pathetic death, or if you'll have the chance to find your part in this war and work for our common goal. There is no other option for you.”

Tony listened to Natasha's threat, not looking in her eyes, but to the ground, his lips pressed together to avoid a grin. He probably should not feel like laughing considering the fact that this was a real death-threat, that she really meant it, that SHIELD really meant it.

He had pissed people off so much that even those usually rooting for him had been unable to undermine this decision. Good job, Tony.

No, he could not hold back a grin when he looked up to her again. Yet, it was more a baring of teeth now, not reaching his eyes - because all of this did not matter a bit. Because she was right: she had caught him and now, it was either cooperation or death.

His grin died down when he answered, playing his last card before he failed to generate a new plan.

“It doesn't really work out, though. If you think I'll just play the cube in your hands after you've let me go, just like that, no tongue in cheek, then you're-”

Just the interval between two intakes of breath and Natasha had closed the distance between them, her sleek, agile body holding him still against the wall. Yet, it was not her hand on his upper arm that made him freeze in his movements, but the cold metal of her gun pressing against the warm skin of his lower abdomen.

When she spoke again, the undertone of her voice was urgent and Tony believed for a second that
there was really something akin to concern speaking from it.
Then he remembered who she was.

“Do you still want to die, Stark?”

Her voice was trembling only the slightest bit, her breath brushing against his ear. In other situations, her body might have distracted him, might have made him swallow and lick his lips, yet he had to remember she was playing him.
She was a spy, she was the Widow. She was not his pal any longer. He was her target and she would do everything to catch him.

Tony stared straight at the opposite wall when she went on, face deliberately expressionless.

“Because if you want to, then this is your chance. Yet, if this still is you wish, then everything you did until now was in vain. Think about it.”

A last time, she bore the barrel of her gun in his flesh, a quick, sharp pain, then she stepped back to look at his face.

They both remained silent for a few seconds, the wind tousling her hair, whirling small clouds of dust and dirt through the street. The gun was still pointed at him, resting at the side of her hip. Her former blatant threat was now merely a reminder of what would wait for him if he did not play along.

The genius made a decision.

"It's not that simple.,” he finally said, a hint of resignation in his voice, “Snatching the cube from him and turn it over to you guys... I'd have to kill Loki. Or you'd have to.”

“I'm pretty sure you will find a way, Stark. There are rumors that you are a clever man.”

His answering smirk was a tired one.

“It's hard to lose a reputation.”

“We'll be on your side when you need us. Just don't mess up. Believe me, it's better that way.”

These were her last words before she holstered her gun and turned to go god-knows-where.
Halfway down the street, she suddenly halted – Tony had already started to relax his tensed body a bit – and turned around to him again.

“I almost forgot something. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Stark.”

“Fuck you.”

She probably took that as a compliment, vanishing around the street's corner in the next instant, not taking another look at him.
Natasha was a professional – surely nobody who knew of what she was capable of would ever be daring enough to wind her up. No need for her to look back twice.

When Tony, after almost 5 minutes he had remained on the spot with his thoughts circling around that expected, yet still surprising development and how to deal with it, finally started walking back to the car, he knew exactly who would be the one to outsmart Natasha Romanoff.

It was all a matter of time: would it take longer for them to finish their work and enable Loki to
absorb the Tesseract's full power or for SHIELD to find out that there was no version of this story where Tony would ever betray his once-took decision?

The are on his skin where Natasha had pressed her gun against was still itching slightly, but Tony held back from running his fingers over the spot until he was a few blocks further away. You never knew who was watching you.
When he finally lifted his shirt a bit to feel the spot and his fingers wandered over a small bump, he cracked a small smile.

A tracking device, of course. Subtle enough to remain unseen for the eyes of those who did not know, yet so overt that he had to find it sooner or later.
They wanted to him to know that they were watching him. 'Always on your side.'

When their car came in sight, he managed to give the impression that nothing had happened.
Loki was still nowhere to be seen.

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For a few seconds, the god stood rooted to the spot, then turned around to follow the widow out of the alley and put a certain distance between himself and Tony.
Of course he could have stayed, turned back to visibility and confront the mortal about what had just happened between him and the spy, but there were two reasons to do otherwise.

First, he wanted to follow Romanoff. He needed to find out if they were planning something else on them, perhaps a secret assassination attempt, or if they might have a new type of weapon that could be dangerous - even for him.

However, the second reason was much more important to the god: He wanted to let Tony believe in his ignorance.
Loki wanted to see his reaction.

Would he betray Loki, coax him to give away the Tesseract, or even try to kill him in his sleep? Or would he ignore the threat and stay loyal to the creature that had once been his enemy - betray his old comrades?

It was the ultimate test.
The test, if Loki could trust Tony, if their friendship was more than a pathetic facade that had been build out of desperation and the lack of better alternatives.

Right now, he could not tell which of the two possibilities was more likely.

As expected, the widow's path lead her back through the entire town, right into the center where Loki had spotted the car.

It was clearly noticeable that she was on edge – the muscles in her back were taut, the grip around the gun firm and he did not miss the way she stopped from time to time, carefully observing the streets around her and listening.
Sometimes, she even hesitated before she crossed a larger open area as if she expected to be suddenly jumped at.

Apparently, her partner had informed Romanov about Loki’s appearance closely followed by his escape and now, she thought him to be somewhere in these streets, lurking around the corner, ready to attack.
Well, she was not that far away from the truth. In fact, death was much closer right now than she might have guessed.

The widow had impressive abilities - at least for a mortal - but in the current situation, Loki could have her dead on the ground before she even realized that something had hit her. Yet he did not do it. A dead SHIELD agent would have caused more problems than a living one. He merely followed her through the monotonous streets of gray and red stone, until she reached the plaza.

Waiting there for her was Barton, for once having climbed down from the roof. He looked the very same as Loki remembered him: same uniform, same hair, same bow. The only difference was a pair of dark violet glasses.

As always, his gaze was fixed on his surroundings and he was living up to his name, the arrow on his bowstring implied that he was as anxious for an attack as his partner. For a short moment, Barton stared right at Loki and the god almost believed that he might be able to see him, but then his piercing gaze moved on to focus on the Romanoff instead.

The archer's stance relaxed slightly at the sight of her, but the bow remained in its half-taut position.

“Was he cooperative?”

“Only as much as he had to be kept alive. Stark is stubborn, has always been, but he is also smart enough to know that he will only delay the inevitable if he tried to protect Loki.”

Barton's face visibly twitched at the mention of Loki's name.

“You know, I almost had him. A few seconds more, and I'd have had that bastard.”

His hands flexed around the bow.

“You'll get another chance, we'll follow them and intervene when it is time. Get in the car, we have to be ready.”

Everything important seemed to have been said, or the conversation was to be continued inside the vehicle, because after taking a last, long glance around the plaza, Barton turned around as well and disappeared behind the car's tinted glasses.

The engine came to life, and Loki was surprised how quiet it was – it was barely more than a light hum. No wonder that he had not heard it upon their arrival in the city. Usually, the noise of such a machine would have echoed off the house walls, audible even blocks away, but this car was almost as silent as a shadow when it drove off into the nearest street.

Loki waited for a few moments, until the red vehicle was out of sight, then left to return to their own car. He was sure that he would find Tony there. On his way, the invisibility-spell dissolved into nothingness. Now, with the tension gone, the walk back seemed much longer and tiring, although his mind was still full of thoughts and worries.

That SHIELD had once again stepped onto the stage was an unnecessary drawback, another factor that would consume his energy and attention. Barton and Romanov were not to be underestimated, and killing them before they had a chance to kill Loki was no option either - at least not at this point.
There would be new agents to replace them, maybe more than only those two and the rest of the rest Loki did not know as well. He was not ready to face an additional threat like that, at least not in his current state, but, things could change fast...

“No fruitful hunt?”, Loki asked Tony, who was leaning against the car when the god finally arrived.

“No really, no. Everything was empty. And, uh, I might have changed my opinion about staying here. I saw pillagers, only four blocks away. Don't know if there aren't more around. It would be a real turn-off to lose the car and all the equipment to those idiots while we're sleeping…”

The lie was so cheap that Loki had loved to laugh the mortal in the face, nevertheless he stayed calm on the outside and simply answered:

“Sure, I didn't like this place anyway.”

With that common agreement, they did not waste any more time and both climbed back into the car, leaving the last houses behind only minutes later.

Loki knew that the assassins were close behind them, just out of sight, yet they were only of secondary interest now. Involuntarily, he found himself staring at the mortal at his side, wondering what ideas and thoughts were just transpiring in that skull.

After all, they would decide over Loki's defeat or victory.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
The closer they came towards the abandoned area, the more they felt like every single part of the landscape was trying to tell them to return – as long as it was still possible. It was a subtle change, but the light seemed different here. The colors were less vibrant, which could, of course, be due to the coming winter, yet, it was something different entirely. For a day now, they had not seen any person or any car out here, only the increasing indications of stampede.

It was downright depressing.

Yesterday, after the little incident with the two SHIELD agents they had spent the night out of town instead.
Loki had not slept a second, and he knew Tony had not, too, although they had both pretended to. As much as it seemed unfortunate for their trip, Loki did not trust Tony entirely.
He knew that they were connected through their shared aim in a certain way, he knew that they had stayed together for months now and had supported each other through the most difficult situations, but still the trust was gone – for now.

It might have been sad, considering how much had happened, but Loki Liesmith had been betrayed too many times himself to be able of the act of simple and utter trust.

And, if he was honest to himself, it was obvious that there was not much he could offer Tony that SHIELD could not offer, too. He knew that the mortal had a much greater chance of survival when he stuck with his old comrades, and he also knew that Tony was intelligent enough to be aware of that.

Yet, there was still hope.
Hope that Tony would not suddenly turn away from him and ruin everything within a few short moments, everything Loki had fought for for months now. Despite the lack of trust, Loki considered the mortal a friend and it would hurt to lose this friendship.

Loki tore his gaze away from the landscape outside to look at the human beside him, who had been unusually quiet for the past hours.
Under different circumstances, he might have wondered what kept Tony so silent, but with his current knowledge it was no mystery to him. He was probably planning how to get the Tesseract from Loki.
Or, how to escape from the assassins.

“It has been exactly 5 hours now since you said the last word. Are you becoming ill, Tony?”

There was a hint of mockery in Loki’s voice, yet he managed to keep his tone friendly.

“Nah. It’s just... I mean, you did take a look outside, did you? I feel like Dante, wandering down the circles of hell. It’s getting worse and worse. Only that I, in contrast to him, know what’ll await me in the deepest circle.”

The god was silent for a second, pondering about Tony’s words before he answered.

“So, what does await us?”
“Betrayal.”

The monosyllabic answer hung in the air for a few moments, rendering Loki unable to speak. He was more than surprised by those words, yet somehow, they sparked a premature happiness within him. Although he could not be certain, he almost expected the mortal to tell him about his encounter with Romanov.

Yet, when there came no further clarification, he decided to dig a little deeper.

“Do explain.”

The god did not miss how Tony almost flinched, eyes a little bit wider than the second before - as if caught while doing something forbidden. Then, he calmed down again, his inner thought process almost visible on his face.

Surely, he thought that Loki could not know, could not possibly see the double-meaning.

“It’s betrayal, the worst kind, when your own government decides you're no longer worth fighting for. They dropped the bomb when they saw no other way to get rid of them. Not one actually, but several.”

Loki frowned.

It was not really the direction he had expected this conversation to go, and he did not know what to make of it. He knew what a bomb was, but the grave expression the inventor had put on did not fit at all.

Somehow, the information did not make much sense to him, although he felt that there was more behind it than what had been said.

“Like the bomb I, uh, redirected to destroy the Chitauri-ship. Back then, you remember. It’s an ugly thing, pretty dark chapter in mankind’s history. Not only that one of it levels a whole city - what's worse is the radiation that follows.”

“That is the reason the people fled. Even if their cities were still intact.”, Loki concluded, and he could not do differently than sounding interested, despite the sinister topic.

“Yeah. You split an atom, the bomb goes off. What remains is the Fallout. It contaminates the soil and the water for years. It messes with the genes, it messes with your cells, until you're crippled or die from cancer.”

“And what about you?” Loki asked, his frown deepening.

Tony had not told him what had happened exactly at the place they were heading for. The only information he had were the simple facts that it had been the Chitauri's first aim and that now, it was abandoned.

Now, taking this new information into consideration, he had to admit that it made him feel a bit uneasy.

He had not really seen what had happened to the Chitauri ship, only heard that it had been destroyed completely. The god had never really thought about the ’how’, but the fact that the ship had apparently been annihilated by one single weapon was more frightening than anything else. Or fascinating - the two things often appeared entangled for Loki.

“What do you mean? The radiation?”

“Yes. If it is harmful or even lethal for humans - how are you going to survive?”

Honestly, before this conversation, Loki had not even known that radiation could kill a mortal.
Yet, apparently it could, and even in a rather pitiful way. It would be a real shame if Tony died through something like that, now that they had come so far.

Well, if Loki was not forced to kill him first.

"Don't worry about me, I don't plan to stay that long. If everything goes according to plan and I won't be stupid enough to drink the water, I'll be alright. Just look out: if I start start vomiting blood or get third degree burns, we might have a problem."

The god only quirked an eyebrow at the rather unsatisfying response, but the human had his eyes fixed on the street again and did not notice a thing. It was not as if Loki could have done anything against it, nor would they turn around now. Tony had known from the very beginning what would be waiting for them, far better than Loki, and he was prepared to face the consequences.

Still, the god could not do differently than worry about the other's health.

Maybe he should not, considering that the human might be planning his death right now. Tony was doing it subtly, but Loki noticed the way he was looking at the side-mirror at least once every hour, despite the fact that he would not see anything.

The two assassins were smart enough to stay out of sight, but Loki knew they were there. They were ready to strike at the first opportunity. As long as he would not summon the Tesseract, he would be on the safe side - at least regarding the threat of getting killed.

Still, it was no justification to let his guard down.

Once their conversation had ended, Loki turned around to look out of the window, his head lazily leaning against the glass, eyes half closed from drowsiness. Sitting inside this machine the entire day, watching streaks of rain on the windows and the dull greyish-brown landscape outside surely was tiring.

So, when he spotted a tiny change in the endless blur, a speck of red-yellow commercial fronts, his posture immediately changed and he sat up to have a better look.

From everything he could see right now, it was a gas-station. It looked pretty much like every other gas-station Loki had seen so far, bright (maybe a little bit dirty) fronts, two rows of gas pumps and a little hut in which the owner resided. However, the thing that really gained Loki's attention was the huge cardboard-sign that was fixed on a lonely lantern. It was obviously self-made, wet from the rain, yet the red letters saying 'LAST GAS-STATION ON THIS ROAD' were still more than clearly readable.

"Oh dear...", was the only comment Tony made at the sight, then pulled over and stopped the car in front of one of the pumps.

They had just climbed out of the machine, when the noise of a gun being unlocked made both men stop in their movements.

"Money first, then you'll get something for it."

It was an elderly man, hair gray and beard unkempt, the clothes worn and dirty, but the huge semi-automatic in his hand looked pretty clean – and ready for use.
It was Tony who moved first. Slowly, he lowered his hands he had immediately risen as a sign of mortal submission, before he stepped backwards and slipped into the car to scramble for the remains of their money that had scattered somewhere under the driver's seat.

The older mortal followed every one of his movements with the greatest attention and the god did not doubt a second that he would not hesitate to shoot if one of them was to make an unfortunate movement.

“So we have... eighty-two... no eighty-seven dollars. How much do we get for it?”

“Twenty liters.”

The answer came immediately, the gun jerking in the man's hands when he spat out the words.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!”, Tony yelled both aghast and enraged, every remaining composure gone,”that are more than four dollars per liter!”

His lips were shut the same second the old man pointed the gun right in his face.

“Either you pay the price, dickhead, or you and your friend fuck off! You dirty pillagers think you can take whatever you want, but not my fucking stuff!”

“We're no pillagers, goddamit, we're-”

Tony was suddenly shut up by the barrel of the gun pressing against the underside of his jaw and Loki saw him rise his head out of reflex to keep the pressure on his throat minimal.

The god sighed. They really had no time for such nonsense.

“Give me the money.”, the old man growled, his eyes fixed on Tony, but darting to Loki every few second to ensure he stayed at distance.

Yet, Tony did not move. His hands remained firmly closed around the dollar notes, even as the other man jerked his gun again, probably rather unpleasant with the metal right at ones throat.

“Look at me, old man.”

More out of a reflex than anything else, the man's head spun around, facing Loki, who had come a few steps closer.

He opened his mouth, most likely to yell something at the god, but then simply dropped to the ground to an unconscious heap, hit by a spell.

Loki looked over to Tony who stared at him in surprise. Then the god grinned.

“Make it full.”

They were back on the road barely three minutes later, their tank full and the money back in the glove box. Tony was rubbing the sore skin on his throat where the gun's metal had left a red mark, while Loki had once again taken the position on the driver's seat.

“Thank you, I guess. Again. That guy was batshit crazy. I really have no idea how we would survive without your magic.”

Loki grinned at the subtle compliment, yet his eyes were kept on the street.
“Although I can understand him, actually. At least to some degree. That ugly gas-station is probably the only thing he ever owned, and now he's trying to get as much money out of it as possible. Maybe to buy himself a new home. Yet, I'm pretty sure that the only thing it will earn him in the long run is a face full of bullets.”

“I had the impression that he thought the same about us... that we're heading towards our death.”

“Maybe not so crazy after all.”, Tony replied, accompanied by a low chuckle. Then, they were silent again, each man following his own thoughts.

The drizzle had stopped a while ago, yet it had not become more pleasant outside, quite the contrary.

They had been heading through dense forests only half a day ago, but now, the vegetation around seemed to be crippled. Many of the trees around had surely not lost their leaves to the coming winter, but long before through a cause invisible to the eye. This ominous illness seemed to have befallen not just a few, but every plant – they all seemed dead, except for a few that still carried yellow leaves.

Then, the muddy autumn forest vanished, and gave view on the plain land that stretched out behind it. Houses lined the street here and there, but the state of neglect was visible even from the distance.

A few miles passed, then suddenly Loki spotted two signs. They were put at each side of the street, both showing a black symbol on yellow ground. The form vaguely reminded him of a flower - a rather strange, deathly flower.

The god had not seen it ever before, but he knew what it meant: they were driving right into dead land.

Beside the street, some people had dropped the discarded metal-fence which probably had blocked the street. There was with a sign on it as well, but he could not read it, since it was turned over.

“We made it.”

“What do you mean? We're far from being there.”

“Yeah, but honestly... I never thought we would get this far when I decided to come with you.”

“Then why did you come with me at all? When you thought that this whole venture was sentenced to fail from the very beginning?”

“I don't know... I think I was just tired of it, you know. Tired of it all. All this damn pity, every time someone looked at me. That sorry looks I got, every time someone visited me. When Steve came to look after me. I fucking hated the look on his face.”

Loki only hummed in agreement, then accelerated the car again.

The night was settling, and they had yet to find shelter. Driving on the entirely dark streets was no option. Either, they would accidentally leave the street and wreck the car, or everyone - humans as well as other things - would be able to see the headlights for miles.

They were both tired, in desperate need of rest, so they had to hurry. It was less the physical strain that required so much energy, but the psychological one. The constant tension and anticipation, of an attack, of something unexpected to happen, was nagging on
both of them.

So, both men were relieved when they found an empty house for the night, or at least something that looked like the remains of a house. The walls were still there, as was some of the furniture, but the roof was missing, nowhere to be seen, and the windows shattered. It would do for one night.

The black SUV had been left at the house-front that faced away from the street, almost invisible in the dark. Loki had arranged a small fire again, in a place that had probably once been a living room, the flames kept at bay by a small cooking pot Tony had discovered.

The engineer was sitting opposite of Loki, tucked in several layers of blankets, as always, and chewing on tiny chocolate threats. The god might have asked for some, had he not been so damn tired. Yet, he did not want to fall asleep, it still was too risky.

He had no idea how far Barton and Romanov were behind - if they would take the opportunity and attack once he was asleep. Or probably Tony would...

Still, in the end, Loki could not help it. He had been able to stay months awake, back then, when his body and mind had been constantly on edge and he had been exposed to unceasing danger every second. It was different now: there was no imminent threat, at least no visible one, and the small fire in front of him warmed Loki's entire body pleasantly, making him drowsy.

Once he had lowered his upper body to lie on the carpet, curled into himself, it was too late. As an unstoppable force, the indifference of slumber overcame him.

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In contrast to Loki, Tony could not simply fall asleep like this. He was tired as hell and his eyes were burning, only increased by the smoke of the crackling fire in front of him, yet he his head was bursting full of thoughts.

He did not want to betray Loki.

In fact, he was about 98% sure he would not. However, there were these 2% of common sense left - and they had some pretty strong arguments. It was not so much about the decision, about what he thought the better or worse way of doing things, or – God forbid! - about something as moral justification, good or bad, that nonsense.

What if it would really come down to these two options: kill Loki or get killed? What would he do?

Frankly, he did not know.

Which was, observed objectively, a pretty surprising development for him and something he could not quite explain, not even to himself.

It was never easy to decide about life-or-death-scenarios and usually, he went with his gut instinct, but now, he actually had the time to think before making his decision. There was no nuke going up in less than a minute, no adrenalin-fueled brain-functions making him go all kamikaze.

This time, he had to plan what he would do.

For now, the plan involved nothing more than turning a blind eye on the consequences, so that
they could go on with their actual plan.

Still, he was leaving himself some options open, a Plan B, so to say. It was gutless, he knew, because if he really trusted the god, he would have told him about Natasha.

However, he had not - and right now, he was certain she was somewhere out there in the dark, watching the shine of the fire as a sure cue for their exact position. She would wait for him to strike, no matter how long he would need to get it over with.

Tony wondered how hard it would be.

Not that he wanted to... but, Loki was there, right in front of him, curled up into a ball and sleeping like there was no danger in this world. His breathing was deep and even, although he had closed his eyes barely an hour ago.

Exhaustion took its toll, even on him.

If Loki had not been a god in possession of the craziest magic, this would have been almost perfect conditions to kill him. No one around (well, not exactly, but anyway) to hear possible noises of struggle, no witnesses, no police corps who would dare to set their feet in here to investigate.

What stupid thoughts.

There was no sense in doing it now, not when the Tesseract was still hidden in some other dimension.

Tony closed his eyes and pressed his fists against them, until everything went completely black and he began to see stars.

A small, tired groan built in his throat, sounding so loud and unfitting when it left his mouth that he almost startled itself.

It was deafeningly quiet around them - even such a tiny noise felt like it would be heard for miles. No animal noises, of course, and the wind had subsided as well. The dying fire was making small buzzing noises now and then, but other than that, it was perfect nocturnal silence.

Loki was still sleeping, though, and maybe, Tony should as well.

His limbs stiff from sitting for so long, he heaved himself up from the floor to get himself a bottle of water, stepping over empty plastic packages and heaps of blankets here and there on the way. The fire was only ash by now, but the moon illuminated the wide land around them with its white light.

At this time, in this light and with his level of drowsiness, it felt like they were on another planet.

His thoughts still pointlessly wrapped around the origin of this strange feeling, this notion that all of this was unreal, impossible to actually happen, he eventually came back from the car.

When he looked at Loki now, who had not been waken up by his walking around and banging the car doors, something refrained him from simply going to bed.

It could not possibly be that easy....

Carefully dropping the bottle on the floor, Tony walked closer to the sleeping god. His feet were barely making any noise, but he was only waiting for Loki to wake up.

Yet, he came as close as possible without being noticed. He could even hunker down on the god's side, noticing with fascination how his own heartbeat pulsed like he had just ran a marathon.

His gaze traveled over the pale, moon-lit face, the lips only slightly parted, those features who only
looked calm when Loki was sleeping like this. The sleek black curls were partly covering his face and neck, still, the inventor's eyes could easily follow the line of his neck's sinew and where it was disappearing under his hoodie.

So easy to lay your hands around there, when you did not think about the consequences.

Jesus, what was he doing here?!

Tony could not even say. He had no idea what to say in his defense, should Loki's eyes suddenly open and stare at him, judging him for something he had not done yet. Although, he was here, right? If he was here, it was just a small step left to go.

His right hand extended slowly, until his fingers met the soft strands of hair. He could lift them from Loki's skin, free the view of his neck, just like that. Loki's breath did not even stutter, so Tony went on, not knowing why, but somehow distantly feeling that he had to prove this to himself. He had to know if he was capable of doing this, when it would become necessary.

IF it would become necessary.

Ever so slightly, his thumb ran down the line of Loki's neck.

Tony's heart was beating loud in his ears. He did not even realize he was holding his breath, his dark eyes intensively fixed on Loki's face, waiting for him to wake up. He did not.

Why did he not wake up?! Why did he have to make this so easy? Why did he have to leave Tony with his bad conscience, with his twisted, torn thoughts?

His other fingers followed, tracing along Loki's throat, the Adam's apple. The god's skin was soft and cold, but he could feel the vibrations of life through it, the rhythm of his pulse. He did not employ any pressure, just let his fingers follow a path they seemed to know better than he did himself. If one had not known the thoughts in his head, the gesture would have appeared caressing, almost tender.

Tony swallowed hard when he imagined how far he could go until Loki would wake up.

The possibilities alone were making adrenaline rush through his whole system, and although he should already know that he could do it, that he had proven himself to be capable, he could not find the discipline to stop himself now. Now that the game was on, he did not know how to end it again.

Maybe just a little bit of pressure...

Firm, but without force, his hand closed around the god's throat. It rested there for a few seconds, motionless, warm skin meeting cool one. Tony only stared with wide eyes, mind completely blank when he felt Loki swallow under his fingers.

The next moment, Loki breathed a small sigh, shifting his body only the slightest bit. A small, barely noticeable smile curled the corners of his lips, radiating satisfaction.

For a horrible second, Tony froze - then he realized that the god was still sleeping, that he felt that touch as a caress. That thought was the tipping point.

The inventor flinched and withdrew his hand with an abruptness and speed that he had almost fallen over, but when his shocked stare fell on the other's face again, he was still sound asleep.
“Oh fuck...”, he uttered an agonized groan, then scrambled to his feet again as quickly as he could. A long litany of muttered “Fuck!”’s could be heard all the way until he had found his sleeping place again, where he slumped down on the blankets, leaning heavily against the wall.

Not even the pain of banging the back of his head against the cold stones could wipe out the nauseating feeling of self-disgust he felt, his remorse eating him up from inside. It had been bad to shellac Steve, but he had given him a fair chance and they had fought face to face – but this?!
This was wrong, wrong on so many levels.

Should it not be the other way around? Deceived and sold by the Trickster God, that was how it was supposed to be.
But no, apparently, he was even worse than Loki’s reputation.

Chapter End Notes

Oh yes, the drama!
Rays of pale light from the autumn sun shining in his face were what woke Loki.

He opened his eyes, blinking a few times in the brightness around, and the first thing he could make out were the cooking pot full of ash and a heap of blankets on the other side of it. Tony had almost entirely disappeared under them, his hair the last visible part of him and it was no wonder – it had severely cooled down during the night.

Tiny specks of frost covered parts of the ground and walls, and the air was freezing cold. Some ice crystals had come astray and built in Loki's own hair, but he combed them away with a few quick movements of his fingers.

Disturbed by the noise, the human began to stir as well, then removed the blankets with one fluid movement and sat up. Judging from the look on his face, he had probably been awake for a while now, or had not slept in the first place.

Yet, as it looked like, he had not taken his chance, the very first moment of vulnerability during the night, to take advantage of him. That realization made Loki feel a little more light-minded, at least for a few moments.

Tony's actions, or his not-actions did not mean much at this point. It had barely been a day ago that he had encountered the spy.

“Good morning.”, Tony mumbled, stretching his stiff limbs, and shuddered when the blankets fell off, exposing him completely to the cold morning air.

“Fuck, it's cold!”, he sounded almost reproachful, then he turned to Loki, “Breakfast in the car, are you with me?”

The god looked at the mortal for a few moments, then nodded and wordlessly began to pick up the remaining packages of food – Tony had emptied a few of them the evening prior.

The other's arms were already full with the heap of blankets he had slept in and he was out of the building by the time Loki had collected as much as he could carry.

Hesitantly, the god followed him out of the building into the open.

The air outside was even colder, yet there was no wind. Thick fog hung in the air, making it impossible to make out anything that was further away than a hundred feet.

Everything Loki could see within this limited area was plain land, brown grass, cracked asphalt and abandoned buildings.

Inside the car, it was distinctly warmer and Tony had already spread out some food on the car's dashboard.

It was the same stuff as always: chocolate, chips and crackers – Loki really got tired of it, yet Tony did not seem to mind – and half of a salami. The god regarded the piece of meat a little longer than the rest. It was the only thing he considered to eat, since it was the only piece of food they had that did not fit into the category of 'junk'.

However, he came seconds too late: Tony already had it in his hand and was about to eat it. It was just when he opened his mouth that the mortal noticed Loki's staring. Looking at the god with a weird expression, he slowly lowered his hand again.
Loki had a hard time telling what it was in his eyes, but he looked almost... guilty about something.

“You want it?”, Tony suddenly asked, offering him the piece of meat with a permissive gesture.

Loki was honestly stunned. He blinked a few times before he hesitantly took it out of Tony's hand. Sharing food was rather uncommon if you had to spend your time with Tony Stark and they both knew that the salami was the best food left. Until now, there had not been any discussions about who would get the best pieces and frankly, Loki had no idea why they should suddenly start with it.

Or, what was even stranger, why Tony felt the urge to give it to him.

“Thanks...”

Still eying the mortal warily, Loki took a bite of the salami. Weirdly, the human looked rather satisfied, despite the fact that he had just given away his food.

They ate in silence, the only noise the rustling of package now and then. Yet, every few seconds, Loki's attention was forced on the movement of Tony's legs, bobbing up and down tensely. It was awfully annoying and not clear to him whether the mortal tried to warm himself up a bit, or if it was a display of nervousness.

Tony behaved strange this morning, even stranger than the day before, and the slight feeling that the human might be planning something loomed in the back of his mind.

Maybe, he was just reading too much into it and there was nothing odd about it at all.

“Right, let's get back on the road, I need this car to be running. There is no G-rated version to express how much I need the seat heater right now.”

Loki could not even answer, since he was still chewing, before the mortal was already half out of the door again, heading for the demolished house to gather what was left there.

Arms loaded with their remaining possessions from the building they had slept in, he returned to the car a few moments later, almost running into Loki.

“You really seem in a hurry.”

Loki's implied skepticism was unmistakeable, but Tony just shrugged – as far as this motion was possible with his arms full like that.

“Don't tell me the grunge-look around here makes you want to stay?”

With these words, he passed the god, then crammed everything he had in his arms to the other stuff on the back-seat.

Apparently, and to his huge surprise, Tony had also taken Loki's supplies. The god could not remember any occasion before on which he had done that, and therefore, Loki sounded a little baffled when he turned around and asked:

“Have you... taken my things...?”

“Yeah, already got them. Come on.”

“Well, thank you...”

The god continued to eye Tony suspiciously, attempting to read from his body language. It had already become a regular activity for him, mapping out every movement pattern of the human - It
was a habit of Loki, he liked to be able to foresee the people's behavior around him. Without this knowledge about the human, he might not have been able to notice the fine nuances in which his behavior differed from the usual.

The way Tony kept his eyes everywhere but Loki, the subtle avoidance of touch when he climbed into the car – and the total absence of the mortal's babbling which usually came so naturally from his mouth, always filling the silence.

Before the inventor could engage a gear, Loki reached out and rested his hand on the mortal's arm. Tony twitched under his touch, and his head turned.

Their gazes met.

"Is something the matter?"

Tony frowned, the look of somebody almost indignant at the mere accusation that he was not okay.

"Not that I know."

Loki was still not letting go of his arm, looking in his eyes, trying to worm out what Tony was hiding.

"You are acting unusual."

"What'd I do?"

Loki hesitated for a few seconds, then eventually just shook his head with a faint smile, waving the topic off with his hand and leaning back against the back rest again.

"Ah, nothing. Just drive."

It earned him another frown from Tony, but Loki could live with that. If the mortal was not willing to talk, he probably needed time. Loki would give him some more of it to figure out on which side he played.

For today, it was enough to have him know that Loki was not stupid. He sensed the mortal's inner turmoil, could almost smell it on him.

They drove the entire day, and Loki had to admit that Tony had been right with what he had said the day before.

It was getting worse with every mile they came closer to what had once been one of the capitals of Midgard.

It was not only the fact that everything around seemed dead - the plants, enormous trees, entire forest were nothing but dry wood – no, an ominous haze was also hanging over the entire landscape, painting it in a weird brownish gray.

Even the sky was dull-colored and the sun was blocked from view, the light formless and dull. It almost felt as if the clouds were pressing down onto the ground below, suffocating it.

It was not from the coming winter, Tony had explained him some time, but dust that had been hurled into the atmosphere when the bombs went off. This dust was cloaking the entire landscape into a contaminated fog, which, along with the rain, had killed most of the humans that had survived in the area and dared to stay.

Now, the only evidence that someone had lived here not so long ago were abandoned towns along the way, a few dusty road-signs here and there and the endless asphalt in front of them.
Sometimes, they passed discarded cars that had been simply left in the middle of the street, gray with ash, and sometimes, when he looked closely, he could make out something that could be a human body at the side of the street.

All of that and they had not even set foot in the areas that had been hit by the bomb itself. Silently, Loki wondered what those would look like.
He had seen war and death during his long life, had seen battlefields and burned down villages, whole landscapes destroyed by the trampling feet of entire armies. Even before the arrival of the Chitauri, there had been conflicts in the Nine Realms, more or less devastating.

Yet, nothing came close to the destruction he saw right now - and what he was about to see.

Well, maybe there was one thing which came close to it.
He avoided thinking about it at the moment, about the fact that he had been the one to set it loose in the first place... even if no one would mourn those he had killed.

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Since there was no radio station around any longer, they were once again dependent on what they found on the iPod. Not that Tony was a particular fan of those bands, but without at least background music, these surroundings were unbearable.

So, the monotonous hum of the car engine was now accompanied by what sounded like Stevie Wonder, but Tony did not really listen anyway. While Loki was driving, he was staring out of the window, thinking.

He had to get rid of something, otherwise this would have no future.

Either, he had to get rid of Loki, but he knew from the beginning that these kind of thoughts were leading nowhere else than back in his own private hell of nightmares and guilt.
Never in his life he would be responsible for the death of a friend again. Yeah, because that's what it was – Friendship.
Well, that's what it could be, if he would not be all thumbs with this trust-stuff and all those social issues. Usually, other people had taken care of that part for him – silently, Tony wondered what Rhodey was doing right now – but with Loki, it was like doing the ultimate boss-fight in friendship matters for the first time without knowing the weak spots - or the right cheats.

The second option was far easier to carry out in terms of practicability, yet the consequences were similarly fatal.
He had to get rid of the tracker under his skin. It would absolve him from the responsibility to decide, at least for a little time.
As soon as Natasha would notice it, she would interpret it as a decision in its own, and then he would have to fight her for real. Only that then, he would have had enough time to prepare.

No, no matter how he looked at it, it was the only way he would go. There was just so much blood on his hands he would accept and he had already decided that Loki’s would not add to it.

“Pee break?”

The genius looked over to Loki, then pointed towards a small, desolated hut hundred feet in front of him with a movement of his head.

“Yes, I need to stretch my legs as well.”

Thankfully, the god nodded without a moment of hesitation. Yet, they had been driving without a
break for more than 9 hours already, so the question was not that far-fetched.

“Oh, thank god. I thought I'm the only one whose ass is getting bedsores.”

They pulled over and parked the car at the side of the hut, Tony jumping out before the motor had stopped humming.

“20 minutes?”

“Fine.”

It was a certain simplification for his intentions that, even though they dealt with each other in the most exemplary manner, in their hearts, they were both loners. No one earned an odd look from the other when their ways suddenly parted to savor the few precious moments of alone time. Even regarding your private sphere your standards became more modest with the time. Often, 20 or 30 minutes a day were enough.

He would not need more than 5 to remove the tracking device.

When he returned from behind the building, Loki had wandered off quite a bit. Tony stopped at the car, inadvertently finding himself watching the god. His tall, lean figure already started to blur into the fog, black strands of hair waving in the faint wind now and then. He was facing away from Tony, staring in the East. Right now, he was the only moving spot in the entire area and to a spectator, the scene looked almost otherworldly.

The inventor tore his gaze off and opened the car door as quietly as possible, then unerringly reached for the pocket knife in the glove box. Finding the first aid kit was a bit more tricky – the trunk really was full to bursting point – but in the end he had found the small bottle of providone iodine.

Another look at Loki, who was now barely visible because of the early twilight around here, then Tony headed behind the hut again and pulled his hoodie upwards. It was damn cold and uncomfortable, but he just clenched his teeth and pulled through. A generous amount of the tincture on the spot, then he dropped the bottle on the floor, before he opened the largest of the knives with his teeth.

Bracing himself by breathing out slowly, he positioned the knife on the outlines of the area and took the fabric of the hoodie between his teeth: Both hands free, no chance to make a sound. There was no time to act pussy now, it was not certain when Loki would decide to end his little stroll.

A sharp pain made him almost flinch when the blade entered his skin and immediately drew blood, but he did not stop his motions. With a precision perfected over long years of practice, he carved an opening in his flesh just large enough to plug out the small device beneath his skin. The difficulty was twofold, since it did not only hurt, but he also had to be careful not to destroy the tracker in the process. The interrupted signal would immediately lead to an intervention from SHIELD – the exact opposite of what he wanted to achieve.

A pained grunt in the back of Tony's throat and a small plopping noise, then the piece of metal fell out of the wound. He caught it mid-air, letting the hoodie cover his stomach again to inspect the tracker. It was fully intact and quickly, Tony placed it on the ground at the side of the wall, shoving some soil over it.
with his shoe.

Then, eventually, he removed the hoodie again and allowed himself to look at the wound.

It was tiny, barely as big as a dollar coin, and the pain was tolerable, but it was still bleeding. As quickly as he managed, he taped one of the antiseptic patches he had swiped from the first aid kit as well on the spot, then he removed the blood stains from his skin.

Satisfied with the result, he checked for anything else which might appear suspicious, before he returned to the car, where Loki was already waiting. Carrying off well what he had just done, he approached the car to enter, yet could not prevent himself from favoring his hurting side while doing so.

“You smell like blood. What did you do, Tony?”

Tony flinched like he had just been caught jerking off by his mom. That was not fair, that was not normal. Loki should not be allowed to have that far advanced senses, that advantage was too much. The inventor stared at the other with a spooked expression, waiting to hear an accusation, waiting to have all of his thoughts revealed.

Yet, apparently, Loki would not do anything of it. He just looked at Tony with a strange mixture between satisfaction, concern and amusement. As if he knew something - and Tony would swear to Isaac Newton that he knew something. Just... how much of it?

Without warning, Loki reached forward and grabbed the end of the hoodie to lift it, including the shirt beneath, immediately spotting the white patch on his stomach.

“You are injured.”, he stated, looking up to Tony with questioning eyes.

Okay, he was busted, totally busted. There was no way he could conjure up some lie-story about the origin of this wound, not with Loki's fingers running along the edge of the patch, his face all surprise and curiosity.

As quickly as possible, Tony tugged on the hoodie to cover the wound, waving off the matter with a hurriedly cracked smile.

“Don't bother, mommy, I'm alright. It's just, uh,...”, on this point, his mouth remained open and he hesitated, licked his lips and then closed them again.

“Yes...?”

The inventor inhaled deeply, looking at Loki with raised eyebrows in an attempt to estimate the likelihood of a quick and merciful death should the god be angered by his explanation (and Tony was pretty sure Loki would be angry if he heard about the fact that they were a) followed by SHIELD and b) that his mate had almost been compromised).

A second later, he declared to himself “Fuck it!”, exhaled again, closed his eyes and let his tensed shoulders slump. Loki was sensing something anyway. Better die a honest man than have this awkward distrust between them the whole time.

“Right, okay. To get the main message across before it's ruined by the shitty part: I'm on your side. I decided to risk my skin for you, so technically I-”
“Tony. What happened?”

The slightly more rigorous tone in Loki’s voice did not fail to serve its purpose. Tony cleared his throat and continued.

“This abandoned town we made a stop in, two days ago, the one with those pretty old houses. When we went separate ways, I was decoyed in a trap by... Agent Romanoff.”

Loki listened without giving away his thoughts in his expression and Tony did not know whether it should make him nervous or relax.

“Well, I was alone and the suit was out of reach. You have made her acquaintance, so you know she has some pretty good ways to persuade one. Anyway, to cut a long story short: they want me to hand them the Tesseract and have you killed. Deal was that either, I will deliver - or I will die.”

The way Loki’s lips pressed together into a thin white line told that there were at least some emotions boiling up, if against Natasha or Tony was uncertain at that point.

“I said yes, obviously. The wound was the tracking device she implanted under my skin, because the day SHIELD will start trusting my words will be the day hell freezes over.”

He allowed himself a lopsided smile.

“As it looks now, we have her dogging us and when she notices that I removed the tracker... I think you can deduct that yourself.”

There was silence from Loki’s side and it was obvious he was thinking. If Tony just knew what was going on in his head... but apparently, whatever it was, it did not include any wrath aiming at Tony's person.

Which was probably because of the way he had told that story: more of his heroic decision to stick to his way, less of the inner conflict.

“I can't come up with a better way of solving this problem and don't tell me you do. There is none.”

"I don't think you had much of a choice here. I also pondered a lot on how to solve this the easiest way and with the greatest advantage for us.”, Loki responded, his previously unfocused stare locking on Tony's.

His mouth fell open.

"Excuse me, you- What?!"

"You heard me right."

"But... how did you know?"

"Let's say I'm an expert at eavesdropping. I spotted their car along with Barton, and knew that they were coming for you. Yet, when I arrived, the Widow had already trapped you. I heard everything.”

Tony was staring at him, eyes wide. For the moment, he did not know what to think. He could not really believe that Loki should have known, because if he had, he surely would have acted according to it. He would have done something, anything than just waiting what Tony would do – or...?
"You tested me. You fucking tested me!"

The bafflement made room for outrage, and strangely, disappointment. He did not know why, but he had expected different from the god and now, all the time thinking that he was the one to prove himself loyal to Loki, he turned out to be the one who had merely been fooled.

"Yes I did. But don't you see? Now I know for sure that I can trust you with my life... you proved your worth before, but never in a situation like this. I needed to see if you would stay at my side, even if offered an alternative so much easier."

Tony merely made an annoyed grimace at the comment, and turned away from Loki. He could not stand to look at the god any longer – if he had to, he would probably jump at his face.

This could have been so much easier! Loki could have knocked Natasha out in the right moment, so that they would have been able to flee. It would have been a breeze, because they actually had the power to take them out – if one certain God of Mischief would find the willpower to do so. There would have been no trust-issue at all, no little angels and devils on Tony's shoulders going for each other's throats, no nocturnal moments of self-doubt.

However, Loki had decided differently. This little shit actually had sat through the whole encounter, he had watched his only companion being threatened and had not even trusted him enough to ask for the intentions behind the words spoken in such an emergency situation.

Tony found that, despite his own quite inconsistent behavior, he had no problem with blaming Loki for the same.

Without another word, he went around the car and hopped at the driver's seat, staring through the windshield with a sour face. After two minutes, in which Loki had not entered the car as well, his impatience gained the upper hand and he hooted the car-horn. The chopped sound echoed through the surrounding emptiness louder than any sound they had heard here before.

When the noise died down finally, the air was filled with extreme anticipation. As if one sound would suddenly lure out every still living creature from the darkest corners around here.

Tony's gaze flickered at the rear view mirror, waiting for the obligatory swarm of birds to emerge from the trees, yet he could see nothing.

The genius regretted this one-off immediately, even more when there was suddenly Loki storming at the passenger's seat door, breathing fire and brimstone about how stupid Tony could be to activate the car-horn when they both knew that there were at least two master assassins only a few miles behind them.

The next half hour of their driving was unpleasant, to say the least.

Since there were no secrecies left to be defensive about, they both found easy ways to attack the other. Although, admittedly, Tony was a little more peeved than Loki and had less inhibitions to show it.

Yet, the fight calmed down again as fast as it had boiled over originally.

Both men had retreated to say nothing to the other and stare out of the window. Tony's jaw was still clenched and his fingers were tapping tensely on the steering wheel, what Loki did he could
not see. He told himself he did not care, too.

Of course, when you looked at them from a more objective perspective, it was more than natural to fight.
Hanging around together 24/7 was annoying, downright inappropriate for the delicate species of intelligent, stubborn, self-opinionated loners they belonged to.
Not that Tony was willing to agree on that perspective.

Now, he was not thinking of accrued frustration and triggers and that he should probably feel good now that the issue was settled and Loki seemed to trust him.
It was way easier – and also absolutely necessary for his injured ego – that there was somebody else to blame for a while. Even though it ended in childish silence wars.

Loki endured Tony's silent treatment for a half an hour, quietly staring at his own hands in his lap, before he suddenly rose his voice.

"I needed to be sure, Tony."

Tony remained stubborn, watching the endless gray line of asphalt in front of him.

"How long do you want to continue that? You know you'll have to talk to me sooner or later."

Not today, darling. The engineer remained dead-pan, his gaze not even flickering over to Loki once. A heavy sigh escaped the other's lips, a sigh he knew just well by now, but which he did not interpret as inevitably forcing an answer.
From the corner of his eye, he could watch the god he bent forward, apparently having turned his interest on something else. The noises indicated that he opened the glove box and pulled out package of candy.

"You want a bonbon?"

The tone was casual and Loki was not looking at him, just glancing down at the piece of chocolate between his fingers. Tony would not fall for this primitive tactic – he was no child, easily consoled by some chocolate.

"Do you really think that a fucking bonbon is going to help?"

"Do you want it? Yes or No."

"No, you-"

Without hesitation, Loki shoved the small candy between Tony's lips, effectively silencing him.

The genius blinked in surprise, then anger took over again.
What the fuck did this little squirt even think he did?! He was going to rip off the god's head the very next second, or at least punch him in the face.
Well, actually he would do nothing of it other than kill Loki with his eyes, since his hands were still on the steering wheel.

Chewing obediently, his sour glare turned back to the street.

When the sticky sweetness had left his mouth, he continued to stare at the street with a stubborn expression, choosing to ignore Loki completely now.
Apparently, the other could muster an equal degree of stubbornness. Not blinking once, he kept staring at Tony, head slightly tilted, waiting until he provoked a reaction.
However, Tony was a master in playing this game, his name would go down in the annals of ignoring the shit out of people.
Minutes passed, with neither of them changing their positions or their object of interest.

Okay, slowly this was getting creepy - and ridiculous.

The god showed a persistence which was impressive and the longer their silence lasted, the more Tony felt like this was less and less about righteous anger, but about proving a point – whichever point that might be.
Unwillingly, his mouth twitched. A second later, Tony burst into a snorting laughter, unable to hold his stern facade.
The laughing subsided quickly, but it did not keep Tony from grinning.

“You are a little bastard, you know that?”

“I'm aware of that.”, Loki responded, also grinning.

“But really, the next time something like that happens, you just don't stand there and wait until it's over.”

“It won't happen again.”, the god responded, his voice as grave and serious as if he was just swearing an oath.

Dusk fell and painted the entire landscape in a surreal orange.
Biting wind blew over the plain land, sometimes shaking the entire car when it hit them from the site, and Tony had to steer against it in order to keep a straight line.
They needed a place for the night, that much was obvious, and so, they were only waiting for the next town.
During the day they had already passed some cities, but both men had agreed that they would only stop once the night settled and they had driven on without a break.

With every minute passing, the chances to find something before it became too dark to see were becoming lower and grudgingly, they both prepared to have another night out in the wild, but then, first houses appeared at the horizon.

“Finally!”, Tony exclaimed and pressed his foot down on the gas pedal. With a roar of the heavy engine, the car speed up, jumping every time they hit a kettle on the untended street.

The town they entered was as abandoned and empty as the one before. A ghastly silence let the car's engine echo unbearably loud from the walls of the houses around.
Yet, the distance they had passed from the last bigger town to this one manifested visibly in the degree of decay:
Fully and only partly collapsed buildings, ramshakle streets and houses, the whole city covered by a thick layer of brownish dust and the remains of what their inhabitants had left behind.

If you did not know what had happened here, there would be a lot of options imaginable: an earthquake, a civil war – anything which caused mass panic and devastation. There were bullet holes in some walls and fully intact windows were a rare sight.
While he was driving through the dismal scenery, Tony found it hard to differentiate this place from the dozens scenes of war he had seen in his life.

This town displayed unmistakeably that they had reached the periphery of the great battlefield
which was the East Coast.

From here on, it would only get worse.

His eyes were already starting to play tricks on him, since both the spooky atmosphere and his exhaustion turned every unrecognizable heap of whatever appearing in the beam of their headlights into the remains of corpses, left dead on the streets when the people had fled town. Upon coming closer, those black heaps always turned out to be something else: loose tarpaulins, bags with clothes billowing from them, piles of earth and debris.

Tony was sure that they would find those corpses if he searched long enough. In the media he had seen pictures of newly dug graves, mass graves even where time and capacity had not been enough to value every single deceased on his or her own.

The genius felt a mean headache building just behind his eye-sockets and decided they should find a sleeping place as quickly as possible.

Five minutes later, he removed a heavy timber which had previously been used to bar a cellar-entry on the back of a house. A protesting creaking noise and the double door opened. Immediately, both Loki and Tony started coughing as a billow of stale air emerged from the opening, but after a few moments, it dissolved in the air.

Tony got out his flashlight and hunkered down at the side of the entrance, checking the room inside for its size and condition. What became visible in the white ray of light was quite a huge room, the walls partly covered with the typical racks and those racks filled with – the inventor's eyes opened in honest surprise – canned food.

“Christ on a cracker!”

“Is it adequate?”

Loki was standing behind him, playing with the car-keys in his hand, waiting for Tony to pass his judgment.

“Well, from all those cellars we could have looked into, we just found the five-star branch. Comes with free food, minus the obligatory skeleton in the closet. I can't even spot rats.”

Tony grinned from ear to ear when he got up again, cheered up by their unexpected success in the shortest amount of time.

“Great. Then we should stay here for a while longer.”

Loki's answer came with a small smile, then he turned around to start unpacking the car.

They had both agreed that sleeping in a cellar would be the best solution, since most of the buildings seemed in danger of collapsing if you just took a peep at them. Also, it was much safer and a nice change of pace to all that forced camping during the last days.

There was still a major part of work undone and a safe place to proceed was essential. The suit was unfinished and Loki... well, there was a great challenge coming up for him. But this here, this was just the place for it.

The god and he agreed that, despite any feelings of exhaustion, they would take the tools and material with them inside, together with what was needed for sleeping and eating. There were a lot
of boxes and unnecessary stuff from their predecessors, but Tony trusted Loki’s senses that nothing of it seemed to be dangerous.

Whatever rearrangement and setup they needed to do, it all could be done equally well tomorrow.

It took an awful amount of time to remove every single piece of equipment from the storage of the truck, and the darkness around did not really help. But after some time of combined and uninterrupted work, everything was safely put into the cellar.

The huge car was parked behind the house, secluded from the street, and covered with a huge plastic cover and several pieces of wood to give it an unsuspecting appearance.

They would stay longer in here, at least until the suit was done.

The radiation was still around an endurable level here – at least the Geiger counter told him that - in comparison to the rest of the war zone, and they had a secure place to stay.

Even Natasha and Clint could not inspect any one of the few thousand houses in the city, if they even found it.

The cellar itself was neither big nor very comfortable with its concrete ground and frail wood pillars, but they had both seen worse.

And, after they had placed the two required mattresses including a lot of blankets in a smaller room just beside the main one - where they had left the machines – it gave an almost a homy feeling.

The longer he was on the road like this, the more he got the feeling that it was possible to feel comfy anywhere, as long as you were tired enough. Additionally, Loki had rustled up a few candles, and placed them on the ugly cupboards along the walls to cast some light.

The electricity might be working by a mystery Tony could not quite explain himself - probably through remaining windmills and dams or emergency generators – yet, that was no guarantee that it would continue to do so.

They could not dare to waste anything of it.

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When Loki emerged from the cellar the next morning, peaking carefully out of its entrance into the yard of the house they had chosen as temporary residence, he was greeted with the same sight as the day before.

A dusty, grayish sky, brown plants and rubbish all over the place.

It was quiet, not even birds or insects around, but contrary to their last visit in a town, he could not sense any danger either.

Removing the tracker had apparently been a good choice. They were safe - for now.

The mortal was still somewhere down in the house, setting every computer and device to work, while Loki felt a little idle, with nothing to do than moving some of the heavier equipment around.

He was used to the feeling by now, unfortunately, it did not solve the problem what to do with this unused time.

He was not a great help to Tony when it came to these things and his most important duty at the moment was keeping the Tesseract safe.

Now and then, he heard the human mumble from beneath, then eventually, he climbed out of the cellar hole, looking a little bit ruffled after rummaging around for hours.

“I hope you are on for a little walk – I’m out of material, we need to find some.”
It was one thing to drive through the desolated and ruined streets when there still was a glass window to separate you from the world outside and the noise of radio and engine to keep you company. And it was an entirely different thing to walk along the empty streets with nothing to keep the gruesome reality at distance.

Strangely, they did not see any corpses, not even bones. The solution to that mystery was easily found, for Loki knew that the Chitauri were carnivorous creatures, and they surely would not hesitate to take a meal that was so conveniently provided. Yet, apparently Tony was not aware of that. The god noticed him staring suspiciously at every heap of garbage that lied in front of them, and it was hard to tell which expectation was worse. He decided not to lose a word regarding that.

A strong breeze swept through the streets and they had to cover their eyes and noses as thick dust was whirled into the air. Loki heard Tony cough beside him.

They had been aimlessly wandering through the town for about an hour, looking for a hardware store which had not been completely emptied of every equipment and material. Of course, they had not found anything, and the motivation to continue the walk, when regular sandstorms turned the entire procedure into an ordeal, was constantly decreasing.

It was when they passed the entrance of what had probably once been some kind of forest within the town – those were called parks, he remembered - when Tony eventually spotted something that would provide solution to their misery.

"Ha!"

Loki flinched, the exclamation having startled him, but the inventor did not seem to care. With a sudden speed, he darted off over the street towards the park, followed by a much slower and more skeptical Loki.

"What is it? A map?"

The god stepped closer, now watching with awoken interest how Tony cleared the big city map in front of the park from its dust, using the sleeve of his hoodie, sullying the dirty garment even further. As soon as the layer of gray and brown disappeared, you could make out the map which once had helped to find the way through the town.

"There are no stores on it, though. What are we looking for exactly?"

The mortal did not answer him, but was squinting his eyes, his finger traveling over the key on the bottom of the map, as if searching for something. Finally, the engineer pointed at a spot and turned to Loki with a big grin, and the god read the letters with suspicion.

"Wrecking yard...?"

"Yeah – and only two blocks away."

Loki cocked an eyebrow, not completely convinced yet. He did not exactly know what a wrecking yard was, but it was easy to deduct from the name alone.
Tony still grinned at him, despite Loki's lack of enthusiasm.

“I find it quite alarming that you get that excited over other people's scrap material.”, the god commented with a slightly amused head-shaking.

“Oh, you would not believe what people throw away. I built my first engine from what I found in my dad's trash can.”

Loki's chuckle accompanied the short way to the wrecking yard, five minutes in which Tony recapitulated the beginnings of his passion for engineering and what he had already built from a tin can and two half-empty AA batteries.

Everything was almost back to normal after the revelation the day ago, the mortal talking down the depressing silence all around, now that he had found something to talk about, and it helped the two of them a lot to make him feel more at ease.

Yet, when they walked around the next corner and found the wrecking yard, Tony interrupted himself mid-sentence to let out an impressed whistling.

“Woah there, this is like Candyland!”

With nobody around except for Loki and nothing better in prospect than those murderously high piles of metal trash, there was apparently no holding back any longer.

Starting at random on the heap closest to him, Loki watched how Tony began taking up everything which looked remotely interesting, throwing it away behind his shoulder once it turned out to be useless. They should probably have brought something like a pair of gloves, the god already noticed spot of bright red droplets on the mortal's hands after touching the old metal, but the other seemed to not even notice the cuts.

“Oh, wow, this is cute. A Game Boy. That's the one from 1995, I played with one of those.”

The Game Boy went flying behind his shoulder, were Loki had to duck to save his head from being hit.

“What are you looking for? It is more practical if we split up and look simultaneously.”

“Junk junk, yeah, that could come in handy, junk, oh what the hell...”, Tony muttered to himself, going through the whole pile with growing enthusiasm.

“Tony.”

“Mh-mh.”

“If your inner child held back just a second longer, then you could tell me what we are looking for. Wouldn't that be nice?”

Now it was Tony who had to chuckle at Loki's remark. When he turned around, he was grinning confidently, a loose hard drive in his hand.

“Oh, yeah. I need those.”, he wiggled with the hard drive, “There are some valuable metals inside, which we'll need to complete a few finer structures of my suit... and also for what I'm planning for you. Then just every kind of intact cable you can find, because we will need a lot. And, in general, everything interesting you come across. And copper - as much copper as possible.”

Loki nodded understandingly and walked off into the opposite direction to have a look at the piles
of metallic garbage there. At the same time, it was hard to ignore the noises from behind. It had been almost adorable to see how the mortal had apparently lost a few decades of mental age at the sight of the wrecking yard, but the loud clattering noises he was creating while digging through the endless heaps were much louder than their previous talking. Loki was sure that they could be heard more than a street away. It sat the god on edge, half of his attention always focused on the noise, and made it impossible to look for the required objects.

There probably was not anyone here to hear them anyway - but why take a risk? They had thought to be alone in the last town as well and it had ended up with Loki almost being shot from a rooftop and Tony with a tracker imbedded in his skin. The god was sure that they would not get away that easily upon their next encounter. Whoever it might be.

Loki put the piece of rusty metal he had just picked up aside, and came back to Tony. The human's hunt seemed to have been fruitful already in this few minutes: at his side was a small pile of wires and computer circuits, along with some other things Loki had never seen before.

When Loki touched the mortal's upper arm, grip steady but not too firm, Tony turned around. He was a bit out of breath from moving around heavy metal parts, but his eyes were glistening with childish excitement. The god could not help himself but stare at the almost happy face in front of him. In all these months he had spent continuously together with Tony he had never seen him like that. It was an almost foreign image.

“What's the matter, Loki?”

Loki tore away his gaze and remembered what he had wanted to say.

“You have to be quiet, I'm sure your scrambling can be heard a few blocks away... Oh, and your hands are bleeding.”

Tony looked down at his bright red hands, then he looked at Loki again, a boyish smile on his features.

“I know, I thought you'd take care of that later.”

“Of course, what else am I here for?”, Loki snickered, and let go of the mortal, who, fortunately, continued to search with more care through the metal.

After having this little detail settled, he dared to let Tony out of sight for a while. With all the time at hand, he walked closer into the center of the wrecking yard, exploring the strange place. Just in the middle of it, there was a space free of any scraps and giant machines, like beasts from ancient times, took its place. Loki found himself staring at their long metal necks, ending with deathly, metallic jaws and the enormous wheels under their bodies, entirely taken in by the bizarre encounter.

Then he remembered what he had to do, and that there might be some time, but none of it to waste.

No matter how hard he tried, Loki just could not understand Tony's delight from finding this place. Picking up the dirty and dust-covered metal was no process worth of a god. It became all the more disgusting every time he discovered little puddles of strangely orange-colored rusty water which kept spilling over his shoes and arms at the very first opportunity.
Nevertheless he felt kind of proud when he discovered a plastic box he now easily identified as computer under a discarded metal sheet and was able to tear away the shielding from its side to remove the boards inside more or less gently. When he was done, some of them had large cracks spreading all over their surface, but Loki did not care overly much. There was no need for these things to be intact, after all.

Maybe half an hour later, Loki was contented that he had collected enough for the time being. His arms full of the treasures he had found, he returned to Tony. The mortal's collection of boards was more than twice as big as Loki's, so the god had to take a few parts additionally on their way back to the house.

The mood, so tense and sour the first half of the day, was good during their return.

In fact, everything was as perfect as it could be, considering the circumstances. They were at good terms with each other, had left their chasers far behind, at least for the moment, and their projects were developing well. A few days, Tony had promised him, then Loki would be able to access the Tesseracts energy. The human had not told him any details yet, but Loki did not need to know them - important was only the result.

If everything went according to plan, they would be off to kill Chitauri in maybe two weeks, and then...

Surprisingly, Loki had never thought about anything beyond this point, at least not until now. There had been so many things to take care of, so many dangers ahead, that it had almost seemed impossible that they would come that far. But they had, and what it looked like at the moment, they would make it much further.

And then? What then?

The first thought that sprang into Loki's mind was Asgard.

Returning there seemed to be the right option, maybe even helping to rebuild it, in case they would let him. After everything that had happened after his flight from Asgard with the Tesseract, his grudge against the Golden Realm was close to be nonexistent by now.

Although one might think there was nothing to lose anymore, they could be proven wrong. Loki had been proven wrong, because even when deprived of all his titles, his possessions or even his powers, he still had plenty to lose. He remembered the cold dread that had engulfed him when Tony had mentioned Thor for the first time. The cold, naked panic when he had thought his brother to be dead. At this moment, his envious struggle for attention in competition to the Thundergod had seemed nothing but banal.

As long as he had still time to dream, Loki dared to hope that he might be welcomed as a hero, for having saved the Nine Realms. It was a stupid and unrealistic expectation, but maybe they would acknowledge him this time. Surely there was no doubt about the nobility of this action.

After all, Loki was fighting for nothing less than the survival of Yddrasil.

His gaze roamed to the mortal at his side. What about Tony? What would he do, should they be successful? He had nowhere to go to, no one who wanted him, except for a few assassins that were out for his
blood. There was nothing left for him, not after he had made his alliance with Loki.

Yet, contrary to him, Tony was not doing this for anyone else but himself, driven by only one thing:
A deep, primal yearning for revenge.

It was the only reason why Loki had been able to convince him, had been able to turn the mortal into his tool in the first place.

A stab of guilt hit him at this realization, although he knew that there was no reason to feel guilty. Tony had been nothing but a world-weary wreck, only the blink of an eye away from alcohol induced death.
In the end, Loki was the one who had saved him, but that realization did not ease the god's mind.

Quite contrary, it made him feel even more responsible for the human he had grown so strangely fond of during the past months.
If they came out successful and both of them survived, Loki knew he could not leave Tony behind just like that.

Just why had everything to be so complicated?

Chapter End Notes

So Loki has no problem with blood and mushed body parts all over his face, but doesn't like rusty water. Gods also have weird habits and preferences, okay? :D
Tony had almost forgotten how awfully annoying it was to set his whole workshop up by himself, with his own hands, in such confined space as this small cellar they had at their disposal. Yet, contrary to the last cellar he had found himself in, Loki was an enormous help this time. Without an immediate threat and no severe wounds to heal, his magic and superhuman strength did a lot to move around the heavier parts of his equipment.

It took them both about half a day to bring order in the jumbled collection of items in the car, so that they were able to have a small lunch in the middle of something at least looking like a proper workshop. They had found some tables in the houses and outside, so that most of the stuff was stored at the wall with thick bundles of wires, badly taped together, running through the whole room, building tripping hazards for anybody who did not pay attention.

The smell of raw metal, of rubber and of singed material filled the room and Tony did not need to look down on himself to know that he was smeared with grease and oil. The stuff was in his hair in the same way as it soiled his – already soiled – jeans, and when the thought came up that he would probably not find a working shower in the next weeks, he just pushed it aside. In the course of the day, he had thrown his hoodie in the corner, the cold now a pleasant sensation on his bare, sweaty arms.

Being able to work again, to exert his body in the best way possible, was a desperately needed change after the days of sitting motionless in the car. And showers – who needed showers in a post-apocalyptic ghost town anyway?

“Pure beauty.”, the inventor stated, arms akimbo, letting his gaze travel over the completely changed sight of the room.

“Is always in the eye of the beholder.”, Loki added with a slight smile, then attended himself to the shelf with the canned food again, reading out the names on the cans in a low voice.

“Chili con Carne... Ravioli... Pea Soup...”

“I'll have the Ravioli. Together with a glass of fine Merlot and a nice Carpaccio for starters.”

“Oh, I bet you do.”

They both chuckled, then attended a spartan meal of canned Ravioli which were – thanks to the magic again – at least conveniently heated without the need to make a fire.

It did not keep Tony on the ground for too long, though, since the engineer could not find peace until he knew that everything was working according his calculations. Still chewing, he left the thick, fleecy carpet they were sitting on, one of the nice things Loki had found in the house above which gave at least the illusion of comfort.

“I think it's plain rude not to invite him for dinner...”, he gave a mumbled explanation to Loki, before he switched the computer on and waited for his A.I. to boot.

“Good day, Sir.”, Jarvis' voice was drowned in a static crackle at first, but with a little adjusting, he
could be heard well, “Honestly, I expected that I might have actually lost you for good now.”

Tony pressed his lips together, still he could not hold back a smile at this comment. It was strange, but only now he realized that he had missed this artificial British accent during the last days.

“Cute, Jarve, but don't fret, you won't get rid of me that fast.”

“I see you have made quite a distance since the last time we spoke.”

From the corner of his eye, Tony could see Loki smile at the conversation. He could imagine that for the god as well, although he had struggled with the concept of a bodiless person speaking from nowhere, it was a relieving feeling to hear another voice again. 
Or, another voice that was not hostile.

“Yeah, we're entering the final act, so to speak. Good to have you back, buddy.”

It was probably silly to pat an old, box-shaped computer on its top, but Loki seemed to let it pass as one of the many oddities he had surely faced until this point in his life.

With the rough work finished, they had prepared everything for Tony to start working, so that now, nothing blocked the way from starting the most delicate part of the whole plan. The fact that he had quite the respect of the task he had imposed on himself did not stop him from tackling the topic like everything else he had done in his life so far: an unsolved problem which he would need to solve.

When Loki awoke the next day, Tony had already been awake for three hours.

They had closed the door to the outside, yet the temperature inside the cellar had still dropped a few degree again. Tony, who had raided one of the wardrobes above, had found himself a new pullover as well as a beanie and some gloves (Loki had taken care of his hands covered in scratches), so that he could walk around without the irritating distraction of his own clattering teeth.

It was awkward to wear a stranger's clothes, clothes of a person which had once lived in this very house, had probably tried to repair his lawnmower in this very cellar (Tony had found the machine in a corner, perforated by rust).

However, he thought to himself, practicability was the virtue of choice nowadays.

“This looks interesting.”

Loki’s voice was right behind him before he had even noticed that he was already up on his feet, but the genius had grown used to his sneaky, almost soundless movements by now. He did not turn around, but went on with what he did.

One of the walls had been spared to be covered by shelves or desks and the great, wide space was now heavily exploited as a projection surface of Tony's thoughts. In lack of a better medium, he had almost did a small dance of joy when he had found a bucket of differently colored chalks while rummaging around their predecessor's stuff. That it had probably once been bought for a wholly different purpose was certain, but juggling with numbers accurate to four decimals places helped to take his mind of playing children which were homeless now.

After a few hours of thinking, the formerly plain gray wall was now scrawled over with digits over digits and a few small sketches. Some of the parts were smudged again when the numbers had turned out to be wrong, but all in all, the idea was starting to take on a more solid shape.

Eventually, Tony turned to Loki.
“Right, before I can go on, I need a little input from your side...”, Tony interrupted himself, following the god's interested stare on the numbers on the wall, "Oh, the stuff on the wall is not important for you right now. I'm just calculating the electric resistance... I need to find a way to scale down the energy fluctuation, we don't want you to get fried. Anyway, that's not why I called you. Sit down, let's have a talk.”

Loki eyed him a little suspiciously, but then lowered himself onto the carpet, while Tony took place opposite of him.

“Fact is: I can only work as far as my knowledge about the Tesseract allows me to. Yet, I don't know anything about your magic, except that a simple connection to the Tesseract won't be enough. Your body would be unable to store the energy.”

Loki tilted his head, seemingly wondering where Tony's knowledge about his powers originated, and the inventor was attentive enough to continue:

“I might have snatched a little bit of data from SHIELD regarding your physique - well, Jarvis did – and even though your body might be able to store energy equaling a small powerplant, it's far from enough for the Tesseract.”

“What are you getting at?”

As soon as his abilities were questioned, the god immediately sounded annoyed. He was damn proud of his magic after all, so his patience was wearing thin quickly. Tony hurried to find a diplomatic answer.

“What I'm saying is that we need to make some... minor changes on your body. Nothing big, but it will enable your body to stabilize a much bigger amount of raw energy. In this particular case, coming from the Tesseract. I thought about small implants that will stabilize it.”

“Like the ones you got?”

“Nah, not exactly. Mine are merely nano-transmitters that interact with my nervous system. Yours will be made out of a different material and won't do anything except for locking the energy inside your body... You okay with that?”

Loki hesitated, the thoughts in his head visibly displayed in his troubled eyes. Yet, after a few moments, he seemed to have come to a decision. As if he would have ever said no.

“If it's the only way.”, he eventually responded, still looking as if Tony was trying to sell him a cheesy vacuum cleaner and not enable him the greatest power source of the known universe. He generously ignored Loki's untold doubts and continued with his thoughts.

“Okay, we have a deal then. Second thing I need to know: how exactly does your magic interact with your body? You know, are there any particular spots where you collect it? I have no idea.”

“It's a system.”, Loki responded, his expression changing. When he went on, he sounded almost eager to explain and Tony listened with great interest.

“It's similar to other systems in my body, but it exists on a different plane that the physical part of it, just like my magic. The energy itself is stored here...”, he put a hand on the middle of his chest and drew it down to his abdomen and pelvic area,

“The core of it is in the very center of my torso, close to the spine. If needed, the energy is delivered through another strand that runs parallel to my spinal cord and guides it up to my brain, where the raw energy is formed into a spell. Depending on the category of spell, the focused
energy will either spread back into my own body, for shapeshifting or protection spells. If it is to affect the area outside of my body, the magic will run along here...”

Loki drew a pattern of the back of his neck, over his shoulder and down the inside of his left arm, ”...to be released from my fingertips.”

The god wiggled with his fingers, and grinned at Tony, who had been quietly listening the entire time and eyes following every one of Loki's movements.

“Like some kind of... second nervous system?”, Tony eventually asked a little hesitantly, trying to translate the words into something he knew, and Loki nodded in agreement.

“It's more than that, but the magic is closely connected to my physical nerves. If I get a severe head or brain injury, casting magic is dangerous, for the unfocused energy can easily slip and cause uncontrolled explosions, or even rip me apart.”

Tony face turned thoughtful, one hand slowly stroking over his beard, gaze unfocused somewhere on the carpet. He had expected something like that. Even in the realms of magic, there were limits and dangers – still, there was only one way. When he looked up again, he was everything else than excited.

“That means it would be the best to place the stabilizers inside your spine and at the base of your skull.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“I don't like that. You know, I have steady hands and a few PhDs, but I'm no neurosurgeon. I don't want cause any damage.”

At that, Loki could not hold back a small laugh.

“Damaging me? I risked so much for this, Tony, I would never stop now. When I'm so close, there is no risk great enough to change my mind.”

And, of course, that was the only answer the genius had expected to hear.

Now that he had an established idea on how to proceed, Tony once again disappeared in the distant spheres of numbers, forms and calculations.

The basic idea was simple: he already had built the nanotransmitters for himself and what he needed for Loki was of the same principle. The precarious factor with Loki's magic was the irreversibility of the action: once the device was shot in his spinal cord, there was no chance for a second trial.

It would either work the first time he would connect himself with the Tesseract, or the unleashed energy of one of the mightiest artifacts known to mankind would consume Loki's whole being. No pressure.

Tony took his time to develop the theory, to double-check the numbers and to include any oddities which could occur.

Two days in which he refused to give any kind of review of his progress to Loki, two days in which he barely saw the light of day – not that he missed much.

Still, even though it was not addressed directly by either of them, Loki seemed to notice his nervousness.

Usually, he knew the material he worked with by heart - if required, he could sing the periodic
table like school children did with the alphabet. Now, he had to work with two variables their mere existence he still could not quite explain.

It was thrilling, though, it succeeded in keeping him awake at night, but unlike before, when he had worked with the Tesseract alone, an additional factor had to be considered.

If he allowed himself just one carelessness – he never did – he would kill Loki.

Funny though, how this thought had never crossed his mind before, those dozens of times when he had almost blown himself up in his workshop. Not to mention the times in which he had actually built machines with the sole purpose to do just that - to strangers, far far away.

However, Loki was here, right at his side, and he would never forgive himself if he would fuck this up and lose him now.

With a small sigh, Tony leaned back from his magnifying lens and put the tiny welder on the floor to his side.

Now, when the high buzzing noise of the device was gone, one remembered how utterly quiet it actually was. Only slowly emerging from the depth of his concentration, he looked up and around, realizing that it was nighttime – at least Loki was sleeping – and that it was completely dark inside the cellar.

The only light in the room was cast by a desk lamp on the floor on Tony's side, illuminating the circle on the floor which was his momentary workplace.

In front of him, gathered in a saucer, lied 8 tiny metallic pieces.

They were all barely as big as half a fingernail, tinier even than those implanted in his own body, yet they would serve as enhancements for Loki's magical nervous system. Those little, insignificant forms would help keeping an energy under control which was easily able to destroy a whole landscape.

“Not bad.”, Tony praised himself, then he let his fingers run through his sweaty hair.

His back was hurting badly from the hour-long slouching on the floor and when he got up with a long drawn-out grown, he realized his right foot had fallen asleep during the last hour.

Just when he was doing some exercises, trying to make amends to his tortured body – not even Tony Stark was getting any younger – he realized Loki had awoken and sat up to watch him.

Their gazes met in the half-dark and the inventor managed a lopsided, yet tired smile.

“You're finished.”, Loki stated, curiosity in his voice. A fluid motion and he was on his feet, walking closer to the circle of light to observe what was beneath it.

A vertebrae popped in Tony's lower back when he stretched his arms to the ceiling, then he turned to the god.

“Oh, you know, nothing big. Energy accumulation of this scale in this minimal proportions could easily make millions – or, why not dream big – tens of millions of dollars, but hey, everything for you.”

He shrugged with faked modesty, but then his wide grin disclosed his pride. Loki, who had knelt down to touch what would soon invade his body, had stood up again and answered Tony's grin.

Then, his expression changed.

“I want to try it.”

The sudden intensity in his voice was almost frightening. Within a second, every last bit of
sleepiness had disappeared from his face and the green in his eyes was glistering with raw, greedy excitement. Only to easily, Tony remembered his odd behavior when the Tesseract had been around and he remembered what it did to people's minds. Silently, he wondered how avidly Loki had been waiting for this moment.

“Not tonight.”

That answer caused a frown in Loki’s features, but the genius could not help it.

“I've been awake for 30 hours-”

“32 hours and 47 minutes exactly, Sir.”, Jarvis interrupted, helpful as always.

“You heard it. My back is killing me and besides, I don't trust my hands to deal with that kind of delicate matters right now. A nap of 8 hours and I'm your man.”

There was a short moment of silent staring which Tony, unfortunately, had to interrupt with a yawn. Despite the disappointment, something like flattered amusement suddenly flickered in Loki's smile when he answered.

“You still are afraid you could hurt me.”

“Night, snowflake.”

A friendly tap on the god's shoulder and Tony headed for the bed.

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Loki watched the human settling down for the night, movements heavy. Only when he was sure that the mortal was fast asleep, he shut off the light, and sat down beside the spot where Tony had been working.
The room around was entirely dark now, no light was invading the blackness of the subterranean room. Only his advanced sight enabled the god to make out the little pieces of metal lying in front of him.
He picked them up, one after the other, almost gently, regarding the tiny things in his hands with a thoughtful gaze. Soon, they would enable him access to what he had been waiting for so long. Soon, the Tesseract would be his and his alone.
For years now, he had been fighting for this moment, he had undertaken so much, had come this far. Every fibre of his being was craving for it and now, as he was so close, he could barely endure the thought to have to wait another few hours.

With a swift motion of his hand and a static crackling, the Tesseract was torn out of the dimensional fold, dropping right into his open palm.

Loki could feel the intense energy prickling on his skin, could almost taste it in the air. Mesmerized by the intense blue of the cube, he put both of his hands around it, and lifted it to his head, pressing his forehead against it. The contact alone made him feel dizzy and lightheaded, and he could barely imagine how it would feel to have this energy pulsing through his very being, all to his avail.

Still holding the Tesseract in one hand, Loki lowered it from his head, and cast another look at the small metal transplants shimmering in the blue light. They had a dark golden color, a slightly bowed shape and were covered with the tiniest circuits, too small to be seen by most human eyes.
A shiver ran down his spine, curving the corner's of his mouth into a smile.

Only a few hours, he told himself, then the waiting would be over. Until then, the constant presence of the Tesseract, close to his chest, had to be enough.

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It was in the early morning hours when Tony woke up again, only 4 hours after he had gone to sleep. Apparently, his body had different plans about how much sleep he needed than he had.

Still a little drowsy, he trotted past Loki on the floor, who was awake as well and tried to hide the fact that he was looking like a child on Christmas morning. Yet, Santa had to get something in his stomach before anybody could think of handing out presents. Food first - dangerous potentially deadly invasive procedures after.

A rustle of plastic seconds later and Tony dropped to the ground beside Loki, chewing on a Twinkie.

The room was only dimly lit by the small cellar windows, and the small amount of light that made it through the clouds and dust into the cellar was cold and deprived of color. There was no noise, except for his own chewing. Loki really did his best to keep his cool.

“Are you nervous? It's a big day for you.”, Tony interposed eventually between two bites, grinning at the god.

The other grinned back with an almost mischievous expression on his features.

“I have waited too long for this day to feel nervous.”, he responded, shifting his position slightly to sit more relaxed.

Only for a split second, a ray of blue light had shown from between it's black cover, but Tony had seen it and his eyes widened.

“Why is the Tesseract here? We don't need it yet.”

He was unable to hide the suspicion in his voice, but also worry, because the more he felt Loki reacting to the Tesseract like a junkie to his dope, the less he wanted to do what was planned for today.

For one time, Loki actually looked like he was aware of the strangeness of his behavior and the words were coming from his mouth much less literary than usual.

“I can't wait anymore. It has been so long! It's indescribable, my whole being is screaming for it, and when I saw these...”

Loki showed him the energy-stabilizers in his hand, then his voice slowly trailed off.

“...I don't want to wait anymore.”

Tony stared at him thoughtfully and the trace of concern did not vanish from his face. Whatever he thought was right now – and who was he to judge about other people's odd cravings – it would not influence his actions anymore. It was too late for that now.

Wordlessly, he turned around and reached for a drawer in the cupboard, removing a small item from inside.

Loki could not see what it was, and stretched his his neck to get a glimpse. When Tony turned back around to him, the object was hidden by his palm.
“I built something else, but I'm having my doubts about actually using it, although it might be the only possibility.”

His fingers unclasped and gave Loki view onto another metallic object. It was mostly made out of a dark, dull silver, some parts still covered in the darker gold. One side was flat, with an outstanding metal circle on it, while the other end – the golden one – ended in a thin needle.

“What is that?”

Loki sounded honestly stunned when he asked, then he took the implant from Tony's hand, examining it from all sides, holding it into the light.

“That is your connection to the Tesseract. I came to the conclusion that it is most efficient to transfer the energy via a stable connection and to forget the original design with the energy rays. Most of the energy would simply evaporate, because of the- ah, nevermind. This little baby here can be connected directly to the plasma-transmitter we used to create the Tesseract-Pearls for my suit. Like a charger. A Loki-Charger.”

He cracked a grin at his choice of words, yet it was only short-lived and vanished as quickly as it had come.

“And how is this going to work? Do you want to put this thing in my chest, or into my spine?”

“Not exactly. It will be placed at... the base of your skull. Right here.”

Tony leaned forward, reached out and touched the softer spot right above Loki's highest vertebrae to make his point. The god stiffened, almost flinched, at first at the unsuspected touch.

“The needle is too thin to do any real damage - if you worry about that - but it will efficiently guide the energy right to where it's needed. I can't promise it won't hurt, though. Actually, it's going to hurt like a bitch, so, if you're prepared for this...”

They looked at each other, Tony now much closer than before. He knew the answer before he heard it – why was he even asking any more?

“As I said. I waited too long to be afraid of possible risks. I want you to do it. Now.”

“Okay.”, the engineer said with a casual little shrug, “Then I need you to undress and lie down on your stomach, over there. No sexual innuendo implied.”

He winked and shot the god a confident grin, then he turned to gather everything he needed.

Once the risks had been settled and they both knew what they were doing, Tony did not want to hesitate a second longer. While Loki was taking off his shirt to reveal his upper body, the inventor was busy on the other end of the room.

A few seconds later, he returned to the now lying god and put the necessities on the floor at his side: the saucer full of the tiny magic-batteries, the bigger implement for the access of Loki's brain, the pistol which had already been deployed for shooting the nanotransmitters beneath his own skin, now with a different attachment, a marker and a bottle of Iodine.

He sat down taylor-style on Loki's right side at the level of his hip and quickly glanced over the setup.

Despite the self-confidence he displayed, now that it was too late to have doubts, he was still glad to have a print-out of the anatomical structure of spine and skull. He was a mechanic, not a neurosurgeon and if he could not rely on hovering holograms all over Loki's body – sometimes he
actually did miss his workshop quite a bit – he had to rely on this.

“Just to be sure: I suppose, this is what it looks like inside you as well?”

He shoved the paper under Loki's nose, who just glanced at it and nodded approvingly, before he let his head rest on his arms again. Lying there like that, alternating between watching the inventor pottering around and having his eyes closed, Loki looked so utterly relaxed that it was nothing but unfair. You did not look like that if you were minutes before having immense physical pain imposed on your body.

“Awesome.”, Tony commented, yet his thoughts were already somewhere else again, always traveling faster than his actions.

He took the marker first, then checked the sketch on his paper, before he observed Loki’s naked back again. For a moment, he managed to abstract the image in front of him, turning it into a complicated theoretic operation. Absent-mindedly tapping the marker against his lower lip, he pondered the best way to approach this, letting his thinking become depersonalized and the living being in front of him turn into nothing more but a complex organism with its own circuits and engines.

Then, he was back.

“Right, I start with highlighting the spots with the marker, nothing painful yet.”

His announcement was followed by his left hand on Loki's shoulder blade, steadying his position so that he could paint the exact spot. A second later, he pulled back again, shaking his head and muttering to himself, completely oblivious to Loki’s confused look.

“No, not like this, this is awkward.”

Not letting his eyes off Loki’s back, he got up again and quickly changed positions, so quickly that Loki did not even have the time to ask what was going on. His knees now right and left of him, he had Loki's hips only inches beneath him, straddling the god's ass if he had wanted to. Tony raised his eyebrows at that discovery.

“Well, so much for awkwardness. Although I do have a beautiful look on your spine now.”

“Please don't tell me this talk is what gets you in a woman's bedroom.”

Loki’s chuckle vibrated through his body, the sensation of the movement clearly sensible on the inside of Tony's thighs. The genius grinned, all seriousness of the moment negligible for the chance of a little light-hearted banter.

“Usually, they don't even make it to the bedroom.”

Another chuckle from the body beneath him, then their gazes met. The intense green of the god's eyes was fixated on him, a sly smile playing on his lips, a smile Tony was unable not to answer. His face half hidden by the black curls of his hair, half hidden by his arms, the inventor could hardly interpret what was going on inside of Loki.

Yet, after his former nervousness had vanished into thin air through that little incident, he could not refrain from noticing the sudden tension in the air, different from before. They had lived together in a localized manner for months now and suddenly, a few words and bodily contact were enough to pose a question which nobody of them had thought about before. Tony felt the hair on his neck getting erected, like the room was suddenly energized. Like static
before the striking of a lighting.

He decided to let it pass without comment.

Swallowing once, he took the marker again and leaned forward, letting his left hand once again rest on Loki's shoulder blade. A short glance at the other's face and he saw that there was still this damned smile on his lips, barely visible, almost feline and certainly distracting. Then, a moment later, the god closed his eyes again, obviously pleased that they were continuing.

Now unwatched, Tony's gaze dropped on the god's neck.

Gentle and without hurry, Tony freed the slender neck from the black strands for better access. Only a few days prior he had touched that same neck, thinking about how easy it would break and now - now he was here. With thumb and index finger, he followed the line of the muscles along Loki's neck beneath the skin, still slightly distracted.

The problem had not occurred before, never during their whole journey - but now, for the first time, Tony focused his attention exclusively on Loki's body. Even though the god had experienced a long time of flight, stress, disease and malnutrition, he was neither too thin nor did he look worn out. His wounds had healed weeks ago and had not left a scar, the skin on his back was smooth and cold. Tony had grown used to his lower body temperature, yet every time he laid a hand on Loki, it still sent a small shiver through his body.

The inventor marked the first dot an inch under the outline of Loki's skull, then his fingers moved on. Another dot, then another, one just under each vertebrae. Tony's left hand, meant as a mere support for higher accuracy, was wandering.

So was his mind.

Every breath he took, you could watch Loki's ribcage expand, the muscles under his skin shift and move in a harmonic composition. There was no tension in these muscles, just fluid movement, and every time he shifted his body only the slightest, Tony could feel it. The closeness was undeniable, insistently, with this living, breathing body under him and his hands running along his back.

It made Tony remember just how long he had not touched anybody.

Of course, for a split-second, Pepper appeared in front of his inner eye, her lovely body, her warmth, her power and her tenderness. Yet, these thoughts did not interfere, strangely, because there was nothing even remotely comparable between these two people.

Pepper was still there, would probably ever be, but it was a feeling he remembered when he remembered her. The feeling of home he had always felt around her, of stability, happiness. It was not physical, not real anymore, and certainly it was not making a small, shivering breathing noise under Tony's touch.

He went on, slower than actually necessary, staving off the end of this actually simple stage of the process. It was impossible to deny himself this sudden source of satisfaction now. Not unlike that night he was unable to keep his hands from Loki's neck. Just to see how far he could go, just testing out the god's patience without knowing the exact reason why nor his own intentions behind it. God, he was a physical person after all, and this closeness after all this time of isolation was like inhaling an intoxicant. Tony felt a bit tipsy, slipping into a trance-like state, as if he had had a glass of wine, or two.
He was almost down half of Loki's back now. Along his spine, one could find small black dots on every vertebrae, but Tony had almost forgotten about the painful procedure which was about to follow. His hand was running along Loki's side, the movement so obviously unnecessary for his task that he expected the other to look up at him, say something, snicker. Yet, the god did not even open his eyes and the room remained silent, except for their breathing which suddenly sounded way too loud.

Was this adrenaline pumping through his veins because of what he had to do to Loki in a bit? Was this the plain natural mechanics of action and reaction, of touch and sensation? Or was he simply so touch-starved, so sick of seeing no other people around, that a naked back beneath his fingertips made his mouth go dry?

Tony licked his lips and went on with the marking, his fingers caressing the cold skin with feather-like touches, coming closer and closer to the god's waistband. Every few seconds, the engineer glanced over to Loki's face, almost craving for a response now, wanting it, because he needed to know what the hell he was doing.

You could almost feel the tension in the air now, or at least Tony felt it, and it was making his heart beat quicker with an illegitimate anticipation. What was he even expecting here?

When he watched his own fingers run along the lowest vertebrae, right between the two muscles, he knew he was getting dangerously close. For the last time, the marker applied the color, but Tony's hands remained unmoved. Merely accidentally, his thumb brushed along the fabric of Loki's waistband. Just to provoke a reaction, to make him know that he was there, he allowed his nails to scratch over the skin there, watching how it left barely visible lines on Loki's pale skin.

His gaze was fixated on the spot, probably more than he had realized himself, because when he finally looked up again, Loki was staring at him.

The time seemed to halt for a second. Their gazes locked, nobody said a word. For what felt like an eternity, Tony did not remove his hand. He just let it rest there, a bit rough, yet warm, firm, but foremost – intentionally. Only slowly, very slowly, he eventually broke the contact to Loki's skin, without breaking away from his look.

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The warmth of Tony's touch stayed for a few seconds, before his skin turned cold again and the red marks faded back to pale ivory.

Loki did not know why he had allowed the human to touch him in that manner. It was far more skin to skin contact than necessary for this tasks, and although neither of them said a word, they both knew it. They both knew it and they both knew that the other knew.

Honestly, the god could not deny that enjoyed the contact, as insolent its nature might be. Yet, the touch had felt calming and at the same time had created a tension he had not experienced with the other man before.

It had been a long time ago that someone had touched him like this, had touched just for the sake of touching and not to shove, to hurt, to kill. It had been years even, and Loki could barely remember how the warmth of another body felt, nor
had he wasted a lot of thought on matters of that category. He had not have the time, nor the energy for it, but the fact alone that he had held his breath for seconds now made it terribly obvious how much he craved for something like this.

Probably, had there not been a far more important matter at hand, Loki might have told Tony to continue. In their current situation however, he did not comment on it – which did not mean he would prevent the mortal from continuing with what was so obviously delighting him.

The god kept his gaze fixed on the human’s eyes the entire time who seemed almost a little lost in his doings, licking his lips unconsciously. Eventually, Tony was the one who broke the eye-contact and lowered his gaze again, back to the soft arc of Loki’s spine lain out in front of him, before he reached for the heavy metal pistol at his side.

Loki closed his eyes again, and moved his head to have his spine in a straight and symmetrical position, wiping his mind clean from any thoughts from before to prepare for what was coming now. With his face hidden in his arms, he could only rely on his hearing and sense of touch to know what was going on behind his head. He heard a rustle of fabric and noticed a shift of weight on the mattress when Tony moved forward and steadied his position.

A moment later, and he felt the other’s hand against the back of his neck again, stroking over the skin there in an almost tenderly manner. The touch sent a tingling sensation through Loki’s entire body, yet every feeling of pleasure ended abruptly when the comforting hand vanished and was replaced by the cold and hard end of the pistol firmly pressing against the small gap between two vertebrae. Knowing what was coming, Loki clenched his teeth to keep himself from crying out in any way.

Yet, when Tony pulled the trigger, there was no way he could have been prepared for the feeling. The pain was short, but intense, like a star bursting inside his brain, painting his vision behind his eyelids white for a split-second. Almost throwing Tony off his back, his entire body jerked when the metal invaded him. The noise of ripping fabric sounded through the small room when Loki clawed his hands in the mattress.

Then, there was Tony’s voice again, shouting over the throbbing skirl of pain in his ears.

“Shit, are you alright?”

Despite the burning aftershocks in his nerves, Loki forced his eyes open and turned his head just enough to look at the mortal on top of him. Tony looked startled, wide-eyed and pale, and stared at him, shocked and guilty about the effect of his action.

“Don’t you dare to stop now!”

His voice a frightening hiss, the god made it very clear that he would not allow an interruption under any circumstances. In the prospect of having to endure this procedure another 24 times, including a last, even more painful one, a weaker being might have been willing to stop. Not Loki, though.

He was strong, and had endured worse. No pain in the Nine worlds would stop him now, now that he was so close.

Loki put his head back into place, feeling a droplet of warm blood running down the side of his neck. The clicking of the pistol announced the next stabilizer was put into the muzzle and again,
the cold metal was pressed against the skin of his neck.

This time, the god kept himself better in check, the reaction reduced to a minimum.

The pain was as strong as before, yet this time he knew what to expect and could keep himself under control, the only indication of his pain a low hiss escaping his lips. Tony did not ask another time if he should continue, merely set the next stabilizer in place, shooting it under his skin a few seconds later.

Apparently, the mortal had accepted that there was no arguing about the issue and that there was no way to persuade Loki to stop, no matter how gruesome the procedure. Silently, he continued to shoot the stabilizers inside his bones, acquiring a certain automatism with the time, obviously seeking the solution in getting over with it as fast as possible.

Time after time, the tiny pieces of metal invaded his body, every new pain as intense as the one before, adding to the aftershocks and making his spine feel aflame. When Tony had reached the first vertebra beneath his ribcage, Loki's entire body was shivering from the exhaustion, the constant tension and the merciless pain.

Loki did not turn around to look what was the matter when he heard Tony dropping the pistol on the mattress – he simply stayed limb in his position, hoping that the burning pain along his spine would subside if he moved as less as possible.

There was the noise of a fluid being shock in a bottle and moments later, Loki felt a cold and wet cloth pressed against the back of his neck and being moved over the entire length of his wounds. It burned, yet the sensation was of an entirely different nature.

“What are you doing?”, he mumbled, barely audible with his voice held low and the noise muffled by his arms, but Tony heard him nonetheless.

“A little break - you look like you could need one. I'm cleaning your wounds with iodine, they're small but we don't want any infections... Had enough drama with that.”, Tony answered, continuing his careful movements with the cloth over his wounds.

“It smells awful.”, Loki mumbled in response and fell silent again.

Again, he heard how the metal construction was picked up, prepared, and then its muzzle pressed against the skin of his back. Still, the pain was long in coming.

“We can still stop now and continue another time, if it's too much for you.”

“No, aren't you listening!? Do it! I won't break!”

Another flash of light in his vision and burning pain, then he felt the mortal's hand stroking over the side of his chest. Maybe a vain attempt to soothe the shivering that had started again. Yet, after a few seconds, the hand was removed and the procedure continued with the engineer's utmost precision.

Tony did not stop another time.

When the last stabilizer was shot deep between his bones at his lower back, the god's skin was burning hot and covered in sweat. It was a strange and entirely inappropriate attempt of his body to deal with the odd wounds it had just gained.

Still, right now, Loki felt much too dizzy, almost nauseous to regrow the tissue that had been torn apart.
Slowly, very slowly, the pain started to subside, but Loki knew that the worst was still to come.

Tony seemed to be exhausted as well: from what Loki could feel, the muscles of the mortal’s legs were shivering and twitching from the strain of work and concentration. His hands however, remained steady as ever when he cleaned up the wounds, while the fingers of his right hand were just resting on Loki's waist.

If intentionally or not, the god could not tell.

The small moment of peace did not last long.

The clicking of another piece of metal interrupted their heavy breathing, much louder than the previous ones implying its greater size.

They had stopped the talking completely now, and one of Tony's hands found its way into Loki’s hair again, cupping his head and moving it to the side, to expose the base of his skull.

Admittedly, the god was thankful no further questions about whether they should continue or not were posed.

At this point of the procedure, he was not sure if he was still able to get out a single word if asked. The only thing he wanted was this to be over.

This time, he did not feel the entire muzzle pressing against the skin, but only the tip of the needle. The object itself was pointy enough to penetrate the skin without much pressure, but the stinging pain on the top layers of his skin was nothing compared to what he had felt before.

Loki inhaled deeply, trying to prepare himself for what was coming. Then, trigger was pulled and the construct jolted into his skull.

His mind went blank with agony.

A splitting pain inside his brain, pulsing through his eyes, his jaw, as if his head had been shattered by Mjolnir itself.

He did not even manage to let out a cry of pain, his body simply gave up and went limp on the mattress. His head rolled to the side, unable to move, but he was still trapped inside there, trapped together with the pain.

Desperately, he tried to feel everything else than this, but all he could do was wait until the throbbing pain in his skull would fade out and let him think again.

Only distinctly, he noticed how Tony dropped the pistol and climbed down from his back, scrambling to get to his side.

“Loki?! Are you alright? Can you hear me?”

Again there were fingers, this time not on his chest or back, but on his own hands. His stiff fingers were still clawed into the shred fabric beneath, hardly removable from their position. It took Tony an awful lot of time to persuade the god to let go of it and to position his arms in a more comfortable way in front of him.

Loki opened his eyes, blinking. The pain was still there and he felt disoriented, weak, but it was slowly decreasing to an endurable level.

“Yes... how could I overhear your annoying voice?”

Eventually, he responded with a quiet voice, a tired smile on his lips. He moved his head carefully, and immediately, the throbbing pain increased again, nevertheless he managed to look at Tony above him and smile.
When the mortal realized that Loki was responsive – still in pain, but recovering – he smiled back at him, obviously relieved about the outcome of events.

After a few moments, Loki felt his mind clearing again. The more the pain faded away, the more his curiosity took over again and, without thinking twice, he tentatively moved his arm up to his neck to feel the base of his skull. Where once had been unmarred and soft skin, he now felt the circular ending of the implant. It was flat and barely stood out of the skin, yet the sensation was a strange one. The edges of the wound were still wet with fresh blood.

A little bit of swaying, and the god managed to heave himself into a sitting position. Obviously, much to Tony's surprise who apparently had not expected him to regain his strength so quickly.

A moment later, Loki was back on his feet.

“Easy there, you know I can barely catch you if you fall!”

Tony jumped to be at Loki's side and support him, but the god snarled at the contact and yanked his arm out of the mortal's grip, movements determined and rough. He barely noticed that he was shivering - this time not out of pain, but uncontrolled excitement.

Now that the worst was over, his mind could barely focus on anything else than the great things that were to come – there was no time to waste. Never mind his physical condition, with the implants, he could handle it, he could take in the power of the Tesseract!

Making a step forward, to the door which let out into the main room, dizziness overwhelmed him and he almost fell against the wall.

This time, Tony caught him and mercilessly pressed him back onto the mattress, he did not even let go when Loki tried to tear his arm away.

“Let go of me, I'm fine.”, the god growled, only to be immediately silenced by the mortal.

“If you don't stay the fuck down there, at least until you can walk again, you won't get a single spark of Tesseract-sprinkle-power from me, are we clear? You. Stay. Put.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment, their previous calmness and the almost tender feelings gone, the only noise in the room their heavy breathing. Then, very slowly, Loki averted his gaze from the other's eyes and stared down onto his hands. Although he was not keen to admit it, he knew that he would not gain access to the Tesseract without Tony's help and that he had to obey in this matter. As if he was not capable to decide for himself.

Loki allowed the mortal to clean the wound, then he put his shirt back on, not uttering a word the entire time.

Tony had no idea what he was doing to him when he forced him to wait like that, leaving him alone in the small room with the Tesseract so close. The cube was lying innocently beside him, half hidden by blankets, yet still bright enough to illuminate the room with its blue light and full of foreboding and promises. The more reasonable part of Loki's mind knew that Tony was right to deny him the access, at least in his current condition, but with every second passed, this voice was more and more looking like it was loosing the battle.

The noise of a door opening made Loki look up from the blue cube beside him, to Tony.
“Everything is prepared, we can start now.”

From one second to another, every gloomy thought was gone. Loki grinned in response, took the Tesseract, rose from his lower position on the ground and walked through the door.

The god could hardly remember that he had ever been as nervous as he felt right now.

His limbs felt twitchy and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. His heart was beating as fast as if he had just chased down a wild deer.
The pain from the wounds was still there, a dull throbbing in his head and back, but it was easily ignored, as was the slight quiver of fear that something might go wrong.

There was no way back for him.

Tony was eagerly working on the box-shaped machine that was directly connected to the Tesseract's cage, regulating the energy output. The cable laid unmoved on one of the tables, the claw at its end gone and replaced by a small attachment fitting to the implant in Loki's skull.

After checking the energy levels on the monitors for a last time, the engineer turned away from the numbers on the screen and to the waiting god in front of him. Without another word, he took the thick cable and approached Loki.
Although the god was staring at the other's face the entire time, they did not make eye-contact, either because the mortal was still angry at him, or too taken in by his work to be capable of any additional social interactions.

The hair at the back of Loki's neck was lifted up and the cable attached with a click that echoed in the god's head. When Tony let go of the it, the god could feel the weight weighing down his head, tugging at the sore area.
It was anything else than pleasant, and the unhealed edges around the implant burned with newly fueled pain. He would have already healed them, if he had not been afraid that the magic might damage the small devices inside his flesh.

Tony stepped back in his field of vision and Loki almost expected him to make some joking remarks about batteries and chargers, but for once, the mortal was quiet, his forehead wrinkled in concentration.
The only thing he did was staring into the god's eyes - not meant as some kind of wordless communication, though. He seemed to be... checking for something.

Yet, apparently, he did not find what he was searching for, and so he headed back for the computer and controlling devices, typing in the last necessary commands.

“Are you ready?”

Loki's mouth suddenly felt much too dry to respond and so he only nodded. His previously racing heartbeat suddenly became quiet, as everything did. A calm, solemn quietness filled him now, as if every cell of his body knew the sacredness of this action.

They exchanged a last look, then Tony reached for the manual switch on the controller and turned it.

Immediately, the room was filled with the roaring noise that always accompanied the process of energy extraction from the Tesseract. A static crackling added to it as small lightnings jolted over the surface of the cage, some of them hitting the nearby metal pipes.
Eventually, the blue light flowed into the cable, mesmerizing and blindingly bright.

Then, Loki felt the energy invade his body.

It was unlike anything he had ever felt before – the cube's overwhelming power wiped his mind clean, wiped away any trace of doubt, weakness or fear. Not even his wildest dreams, his most colorful imagination had come close to what he was pulsing through his veins. The sensation of absolute power and immortality flooded his entire being, from the tips of his fingers to the hairs on his head.

It was beautiful, the most intense feeling of wholeness he had ever experienced. The knowledge that he could shift entire worlds, if only for the Tesseract.

His otherwise cold body was filled with heat, radiating it into the room. Very distinctly, on the periphery of his senses, only a tiny distraction, Loki could smell smoke.

Everything had been worth it. Every drop of his spilled blood, every second of pain, the exhaustion, everything, only for this.

Never before had he felt so powerful.

And then, everything happened much too fast.

One moment, the god felt as if he could strike down the entire universe with a single swipe of his finger, and then there was nothing but pain.

It drowned him so fast that he could not even begin to understand what had gone wrong. An all-consuming, overpowering pain was splitting his head in two, the feeling spreading down his spine, into his limbs, tearing apart his bones and seeping into his skin.

Suddenly, the heat was too much, way too much, and it felt as if he was burning. Every fiber of his body on fire, as the magic was urging out of him.

The god barely noticed that he was screaming, nor did the noise of Tony yelling his name reached his mind that was engulfed with scorching energy.

Loki's vision was consumed by burning bright blue and then, everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

We hope the first part of this chapter doesn't seem too rushed, but we were really looking forward to write these last two scenes for months now :D
The noise of gun shots was droning out everything else, only surpassed by the ear-shredding blows of the occasional explosions, some of them further away, some only a few meters over his head. The distance was hard to tell: too loud, too engulfing, too overwhelming was the overall sound, as if all of it was happening right inside his head. The streets of New York City were covered in corpses, Chitauri as well as humans, their blood - blackish purple and red - mixing together and disappearing in the drains.

Yet, unlike the human soldiers, the floods of Chitauri-soldiers were not descending, and for every killed enemy, three took its place. Each time they passed by, every speck of light from above was swallowed by the shadows of the great Leviathans, their huge, cornificated bodies barely fitting into the narrow space between the crumbling skyscrapers. Most of them were immediately shot down by tanks or fighter jets and their heavy bodies fell, burying aliens and people beneath them alike.

It was pure chaos.

Steve had been fighting for more than 14 hours without a single break and had lost count on how many enemies he had killed; how many soldiers he had seen dying during that day, how many times he had hoped that the flood of Chitauri might have stopped when no alien was in sight - only to discover that there were even more coming from the sky.

This attack was unlike the previous ones, its sheer extent was overwhelming. The first assault, five weeks ago, had been small, devastating and fast, but also as quickly deposited and had only been followed by a few minor raids, easily beat down. Yet this time, it was different.

The numbers of their troops was decreasing with every second of battle, here on the East Coast as well as on the other battle grounds spread all over the globe. Time was playing against them, the Chitauri kept coming in like they were breading them right for this purpose - and Steve had no chance to prevent it.

The humans were losing.

Despite his Super-Soldier Serum, even his strength was decreasing. His muscles were shivering with exhaustion should he dare to stop moving for just a second, exhaustion making every intake of breath burn like fire. His blue uniform was tattered and marred with dirt and blood and he was covered in bruises and scratches, some of them deeper and bigger than others. He was dripping hot blood on the dusty asphalt beneath, leaving a trail which only mixed with the blood in the empty streets.

Steve would not be able to endure this level of fighting any longer - even Captain America's reserves were wearing thin after such a long period of undisturbed battling.

With a last push of his shield, Steve broke the neck of the last remaining Chitauri in the street. Immediately after and beyond his control, his legs gave in and he had to support himself on one knee to avoid going down completely.

Now, that the last alien in his closer proximity was dead, it had become awfully quiet.
Steve looked up with burning eyes, watching the sky for incoming ones. The surrounding ruins were cloaked by a layer of dust, papers were whirling through the air, falling to the ground at a mesmerizing slow pace, scorched and torn. The omnipresent smell of fire a rough pain in his lungs, he had to cough, but it did not ease the pain. He welcomed the short break.

Over his own heavy breathing and the rush of blood in his ears, Steve barely heard the running footsteps from behind. Only when he caught a glimpse of an uniformed figure standing in the periphery of his vision, Steve rose his head to look up. It was a young soldier, barely older than twenty-five, covered in white dust from head to toe. The second they made eye-contact, he spoke:

"Sir, I have orders to escort you out of the battlefield. A helicopter is ready for you."

"I can't leave now, the fight's not over yet.", Steve responded, struggling to get back on his feet to prove his point.

The soldier swallowed, lifted an arm to clean the dust of his face, before he spoke again:

"It's... it's not to give you a break, Sir. It...They want you out of here."

Steve did not understand.

Why should the authorities decide to remove him from the field?
He was their strongest soldier, the most effective tool to kill the Chitauri without causing additional casualties. He knew of his own strength and he relied on it – there was no other option for him than fighting until the very end. Steve knew what he was capable of.
He was capable to continue fighting, if he only had enough willpower.

No, he did not want to leave the field yet, despite his exhaustion. No matter that he was certain that he could lie down right here on the dusty concrete and fall asleep in a second – he would not leave. Not when there were still plenty of other soldiers out there, soldiers who did not have the advantage of being a super-powered military experiment.

“I can't leave. ", Steve repeated, voice stern and decided. With a low groan, he forced himself into an upright position, although his limbs felt like lead.

Something in the other man's face changed. He averted his gaze for a split second, his nervousness now distinctly showing in his eyes.

“Sir, the matter is urgent....you need to come with me now.”

Steve sensed the danger immediately - the feeling of impending doom that poor lad radiated was almost touchable. His voice was desperate, heavy with knowledge he could not bear and when he tried again, he was almost pleading Steve to follow him.
Knowing that there had to be a good reason for this desperation – a reason that had not been named yet, which caused his suspicion to grow immensely – Steve uttered the only word that came into his mind:

“Why?”

The young soldier opened his mouth, closed it again and swallowed hard. Lips pressed together, he looked like he feared to even speak about what was terrible enough to evacuate Captain America from the battlefield.
When reddened eyes met his, Steve knew that, no matter what the answer might be, it would be horrific.

How right he was.

“They... they are going to level the city, but want you out of it before...”, here, his voice croaked and he had to interrupt himself, before he went on.

“Before it arrives.”

The words needed a few seconds to fall into place, but when they did, repulsion became so overwhelming it burst out of him.

"No! They can't do that!"

His shout echoed in the empty street, making the poor boy flinch. Steve's heartbeat, previously only barely noticeable throughout the fight, was suddenly drumming in his ears, loud and pulsing, almost swallowing up the answer of the soldier.

"We are loosing...we don't stand a chance. It was decided to prevent these things getting out of the city and spread further. It is the only chance we still got."

This was wrong, so nauseatingly wrong.

It was against everything Steve had fought for his entire life, against all values he held, against what he had sacrificed when he brought down the Valkyrie in the arctic. Deeming nuclear war the only option left was nothing but contemptuous towards the thousands of soldiers that had died defending the city.

Not to speak of the civilians - there were still people in the New York. Not only a few, but millions upon millions. It was all like during the first attack, only that this time there was no portal in the sky, no Iron Man to lead the missile away in the last second.

Until now, nobody had seriously tried to evacuate the city – the task was too much for the decimated military forces. There were just too many people.

"What about the civilians?! We can't leave them here to die!"

"There is no time for an evacuation, Sir! The aliens are already swarming out again. We can't do anything else."

The young soldier sounded as scared as Steve felt at the moment.

Yet, in the end, it was useless. From down here, there was nothing what he could to when someone up there decided to press the red button – and he was tired, so endlessly tired. Eventually, he let himself be manhandled through the empty streets, past dozens of corpses and burning debris. It felt as if he was caught in a nightmare, barely registering that what was happening was actually reality.

Even waking up in the 21th century had felt more real to him than this.

They reached a huge crossroad at the end of the alley. It was, despite the devastation all around them, clear of debris and a helicopter was waiting in the middle of it, its rotors slowly moving.

"Hurry, we have to get out of here. They said there is a ship coming.”, the pilot said when they approached, nervously glancing in all directions and on the devices of the cockpit every few
seconds.

"What ship? What do you mean?"

Steve did not receive an answer and instead was merely pushed into the machine with light pressure by the younger soldier.

With a loud roar of the rotor blades, the machine took off, bypassing rows of shattered glass walls and burning concrete on its way up. From above, the image of destruction became complete: the crumbling facades, the fires, dead Leviathans spread all over the island. One could still make out humans, soldiers - still fighting - and civilians, running over the streets, lacking every bit of orientation.

Steve lost sight of them as the Helicopter surpassed the height of the skyscrapers.

A sudden, terrified gasp from the young soldier at his side made Steve tear away his gaze from the city beneath them and turn it up into the sky.

He did not exactly know what he had expected to see: maybe a Chitauri on one of their flying vehicles or a Leviathan approaching the Helicopter – maybe a fighter jet that was shot down.

Yet, there was nothing in the world that could have prepared Steve for what he saw now. Inside his chest, his heart skipped a beat.

The gray layers of clouds were pierced by two gigantic constructs, slowly pushing through the uniform mass.

Black in color and over and over covered in strange organic patterns, the object was formed by million upon million tons of metal; otherworldly blue lights were pulsing from every hidden spot within the complex. Despite its incredible mass, the ship looked alive with energy, looming and slow, bringing certain death.

If Steve had not known what it was, he might have believed that these were mountains, growing out of the sky- mountains from a dark, hostile planet.

A force that would rip the earth apart upon impact.

Steve had never seen anything like this before. The ship was overwhelming, cataclysmic, even the Valkyre merely a ludicrous display of human hubris in comparison to THIS.

Only now, he realized how helplessly and utterly lost they were.

After he had come back, Tony had never talked about what he had seen behind the portal. In this moment, Steve easily understood. The inventor had mentioned that the nuke had hit and destroyed their mothership, but no one of them had ever expected that one day, one of these things would go down over the world they had sworn to protect, with no separation through a portal.

The helicopter gained speed, putting miles upon miles between them and the city and the emerging ship above. Steve was reduced to watch in silent horror when the clouds finally gave sight to the entire complex of the giant machine, showing that the two blocks belonged to an even larger ship, huge like a whole city.

Then, the split fronts of the ship dug into the first buildings, crushing them with sheer force and lighting them up with explosions.

Even from this distance, one could see the thick black swarm of Chitauri emerging from it, befalling the city like hungry insects on a raid.

"Oh my god..."
Steve heard the soldier beside him whisper, a tortured noise, yet it was the pilot's voice that tore his attention away from the terrifying spectacle in the distance.

"Look away, guys. Cover your eyes. It is coming."

Steve did as he was told, throwing a last, sorry glance on the city that had been his home for his entire life and, in a few seconds, would be no more.

The white flash of the detonation was visible even though the hands over his eyes, its pure, blinding whiteness piercing right through his eyelids and left a burning imprint on his retina of. This vibrant light and a shrill, deafening noise in his ears was the only thing his senses were able to conceive for a few seconds, his system taken beyond its limits.

Whiteness and noise swallowed everything else existing, as if there had never been anything different.

When Steve dared to open his eyes again, the world was burning.

The previously gray sky had been turned into an inferno of red and orange. A giant cloud of bright fire was rising above the island like a second sun.

It was over.

Steve let out a rasping breath, a pitiful sound of desperation and horror. Even though he wished he could, he was unable to tear away his gaze from the fiery show at the horizon. The infernal glow of nuclear devastation was something he knew only from videos - to see his city burn like this, to know millions of souls die down there in this second was unbearable.

All he could hope was that their death would be a quick one.

Now, as the tension of battle had drained out of him and the inevitable had happened, he felt nothing but guilt - burning, all-consuming guilt.

He had not managed to help these people, had not managed to save them.

A part of him knew that it had been a task of impossibility, that even a supersoldier was not enough to fight such a force, but the guilt was still there, and he could not help it. He had been given this gift because he was a good man, because they had trusted in him to help and save – he had become the leader of the Avengers, one of the most skilled forces to stop threats like this, because he was a strategist, because he could fight, because he had empathy.

All of this had failed him now – he had not been able to fight long enough, hard enough, he had not been able to turn the tables like he usually did. He had lost soldiers before, good people and dear friends, but never in his life – a life devoted to bring peace – he had lost the souls of so many.

Steve had failed, miserably failed, with what had been the very meaning of his life.

The memories attacked him vividly once Steve passed by the bright yellow warning signs on the street, the discarded fence and the barricade, set up only half-heartedly. With a glum fleeing in his stomach, he entered the area that had once been one of the most populated in the world.

On the day he had left it for the last time, he had never expected that he would return – especially not so soon, on his own account, and on the seat of his motorbike. Since awakening from the ice, he had often thought that there would be nothing to surprise him anymore; but there was always something new, something unexpected.
Sometimes, even his own actions.

Steve did not exactly know what had persuaded him to pack his belongings and leave the SHIELD base two weeks ago. If it had been the ridiculous order to bring back Banner from India, Fury's information about Clint's and Natasha's orders or the vain hope that there was at least one person he could save – he had no idea.

If this person wanted – or, for that matter, deserved to be saved - was an entirely different train of thought. He did not lose a thought on it.

There was only one thing the soldier knew: He would not give Tony up. No way he would allow him to be lost to SHIELD's assassins - even less to a manic god.

He was tired of loosing everything he had fought for for such a long time. Barely a month after the nuclear annihilation of the East Coast they had sent him to Europe, and after this area had to be given up as well, to Mexico - all in vain.

Steve had put all his strength in the task, everything he could offer, only to see that it was nothing but for naught in the end.

People got killed to millions, cities burned down, missiles launched. What could he do? He just had so many arms to fight with, just so many ways to throw his shield. In the end, he was only one soldier.

No matter how much serum circulated through his veins - he would never be enough.

For himself, he had made a decision: from now on, it would be the best to ignore the orders of authorities – they had caused nothing but grief and frustration until now. Following his own ideas had always brought more results – and had resulted in less dead.

Had he not taken it upon himself to save the soldiers from Hydra back then... they would have died, all of them, and Steve would have never truly come to be Captain America.

There were people who had tried to tell him that it was not his place to make big decisions, he was only a soldier, a soul of the battleground, after all, but he had learned fast enough that these persons – politicians, generals - were even less trustworthy than they had been during his time.

Admittedly, he did not have a certain plan himself, but there was an idea. Said idea involved persuading Tony to work together with him, without involvement of SHIELD.

How exactly that was supposed to work was another, yet unsolved question.

Most people might have considered him mad for trying to save a person who had, without much hesitation, gravely injured him upon their last meeting, but Steve was no one to hold grudges. He knew how much Tony had suffered these past months, and how he tended to lash out when he was cornered.

Not to mention that Loki had been there. This paranoid god was the original reason why the entire situation had escalated in the first place. He would have to separate Tony from him, he needed to speak to him when his head was clear – and not clouded by plans of revenge.

It felt strangely sobering to drive along the empty to roads with nothing but gray desert and brownish dust in sight.

The day he had seen New York being vaporized in nuclear fire still felt like a dream to him. Sometimes it returned, a not so distant nightmare, painted in burning red, engulfing black and blinding white.

However, seeing the aftermath of what had happened his day right in front of him, with no fight around, no adrenaline pumping through Steve's veins, it became much more real to him.

Even though what he saw was bad, he was certain that it was going to get worse – the dead and
destruction he witnessed here was nothing but a result of smaller fights and the fallout.

He did not know what those areas looked like which had been hit by the bombs and the Chitauri-Ships.

He was not looking for craters of pieces of alien technology, though, like lots of raiders had. No, what Steve was looking for was marked as a dark red spot on the screen of his phone. Many people still liked to believe that he was incapable of handling modern technology, but that was a severe underestimation (one that he sometimes used to his advantage). Sure, Steve had been overwhelmed by the dramatic change throughout the first months after his awakening, but that had quickly changed.

Although he had been born almost a hundred years ago, Steve's mind was still young, eager and capable of adjusting quickly to new changes. He could learn from watching and trying - trial and error. Tony, who had been the most prone to make fun of him for his inability to adapt to modern times, in the end had been the very one to teach him how to remove the tracking function from the phone SHIELD had given him.

Back then, he had never thought there might be any need of this knowledge. Although not completely, he had trusted SHIELD insofar as not to turn against him. Everything had seemed bright and promising with their victory over the Chitauri and the just recently united Avengers. Times had been good, even for Steve, who felt as if he had finally found a place in this new world.

Only months later, he had been forced to watch as it had all fallen apart within a few eventful hours, and together the world of one of his closest friends.

Tony had been downright terrorized by Pepper's death. Incapable of acting in his role of an Avenger, he had fled the scene after the funeral was over. His terror had turned into apathy after his retreat to his Malibu mansion. Thor had been the second one to disappear, only a few days after the first attack, but of course no one had objections when the god chose to protect the realm which was his home instead of earth which, after all, was only a befriended ally.

It was different with Bruce who had taken the first opportunity to return to India and off SHIELDs radar merely two weeks later. Clint had called him a coward, Fury had been climbing the walls in his rage, even Natasha had not hidden her disappointment.

In the end, only half of the Avengers had been left, their strongest members unavailable, and so, they had all fallen under SHIELDS control.

The two assassins had been chosen to deal with delicate missions, while Steve had been sent to the the open field.

It was no surprise that the two of them had been chosen for this mission: Natasha was the agent with the greatest knowledge of Tony - except for Coulson maybe, but he was too valuable to be sent to the field - while Clint had more experience with Loki, experience nobody envied him of.

Steve was somewhat confused that they the two had allowed their targets to move so far into the abandoned zone. The soldier had expected to catch up on them several days ago, but the two spies had traveled relentlessly.

Yet now, Steve was closing up on them. The red marking on his screen told him that they were barely more than two miles away – and not moving.

Slowly, the motorbike's speed decreased and Steve started looking around him, searching for any hint of the two assassin's whereabouts. They would hear him coming long before they would see him. The engine of his motorbike echoed loud over the plain land, and was probably audible several miles away. He would not have been
able to sneak up on them, anyway.
The motorbike stopped completely and he placed it on the side of the street.

They had to be somewhere around here - but where...?

A second later, he spotted the red car a couple of feet away, the bright red dulled through layers of dust on the metal surface. The car meant that the two assassins could not be far, yet Steve could not see them anywhere-

The clicking noise of a gun behind his head finally gave away their position.

“What are you doing here, Steve?”

Natasha's voice sounded calm, yet at least a bit taunting. Slowly, he turned around, hands risen in a soothing gesture.

The redhead's face was a cold and neutral mask, but he knew her well enough to know that she was surprised to see him here. That meant that SHIELD had at least not been able to track him after his unexplained disappearance from the base.

Clint stood behind her, bow in hand, but no arrow on the string.

“Looking for you. Fury told me of your mission.”

“And he told me about yours. You are suppose to be in India, to recruit Banner. It was not your order to follow us here – don't tell me you're still following Stark.”

She had lowered her weapon while talking and tucked it back into the holster – he was no threat to her, Natasha knew that very well. He had no intentions of hurting her.

“I think I've followed enough orders for now, and, so far, they have brought me or anyone else nothing. We need Tony, and you know that, too. You can't kill him just like that.”

A slightly amused, yet mostly resigned smile crept on Natasha's lips, and Steve did not like that look at all. It promised nothing good.

“Do you think I had not thought of this alternative, Captain? I let Stark choose: either he would work with us or he would continue with his current plan. He made quite clear whose side he is on.”

“What do you mean? What did you do?”

The assassins hand moved to one of the small pockets at her belt and removed a small piece of metal and handed it to Steve. It had a circular form and was blank, except for a slightly spiky downside with a bit of dried blood on it. Steve had no idea what it could be, although he could guess whose blood that was.

“What is that?”

“A tracker. I managed to get hold of Stark separated him from Loki. He accepted an offer him to take him back to SHIELD, involve him back into our work and allow him to build as many weapons with the Tesseract as he wanted to - in exchange for Loki. The tracker was merely a security for us. One and a half days later, he removed it.”

“You know that Tony never reacted well to such methods. Let me talk to him.”

“Because that went so well the last time.”
It was Clint who spoke, for the first time. Steve's gaze moved away from the woman's emotionless face to the archer's more lively features.

“He might have cooperated, if not for Loki. He was the reason it escalated.”

“I think we can generally agree upon the fact that this whole mess here is all Loki's fault. But you did not manage to get him away from the alcohol within half a year, not to mention getting him to move out of his mansion. Loki managed both in only one month.”, Clint said.

Steve sighed. The archer's words were painfully true, and it was hard to imagine what exactly had transpired between the inventor and the god. Had Tony really been so desperate, so tired of everything that following an insane god on an equally insane quest for revenge was a considerable option? Or was there another hint, another connection they had all missed until now?

If he thought realistically, he did not know how to persuade the two assassins that was still possible to drag Tony back on their side. Maybe it was only his naive, old fashioned hope, but he had never known to be one to give up on the first try. Or the second, or third.

“Let me come with you. I want this one last chance. If not for that, just take me as an additional support. You can't deny that you could need someone to watch your back out here.”

Natasha's smile was the one of an adult who was amused about a child's naivety.

“It doesn't work like that, Steve. We don't need you. Go back to SHIELD, where you'll be of use.”

“You know, I will follow you anyway, I don't care if you agree with that or not.”, Steve responded, more stubborn this time. It was Clint who answered.

“Let him come, Tash, so he can see what is really going on, and won't have to regret it if Stark ends up dead. I don't like to admit, but we could need another pair of hands to take down Loki.”

The redhead turned around to her partner, locking eyes with him for a few seconds. She almost looked disappointed.

“You know that we can't allow him to come. SHIELD gave all of us clear orders. We should stick to that.”

That earned her an eye-roll from Clint.

“SHIELD and Fury's words aren't worth much out here – and even if we would not let him come with us, do you think he'd leave? Better stick together and work as a team, before we fuck this up even further.”

Natasha started at her partner for a few moments, chewing on her lower lip, thinking, calculating eventual outcomes - at least it looked like that for Steve. For him, it was impossible to say what transpired behind the assassins beautiful face. Yet, when she turned back to face Steve, he knew he had won.

“Alright, come with us, but if you will in any way endanger our mission, we won't have qualms about killing you, too.”

“I'm aware of that.”, Steve said, already walking over to the car to take place at it's backseat, with the two assassins closely following.
That had went better than expected – which did not mean that the next part of his plan would be any easier.

Chapter End Notes

We're so sorry that the uploads are coming so infrequently! Our real life keeps us busy with the new semester, one of us looking for a flat, fighting with the internet provider, looking after sick relatives and having a time-consuming side job...

Everybody who has been waiting to get an answer to the cliffhanger.... we're terribly sorry! ;)

BUT....! :D

Guess who is going to the cinema tonight? Guess who is going to see Thor 2 tonight?! :D:D In a double feature with Thor in the cinema right around the corner! WE ARE SO FUCKING EXCITED!!! :D:D:D
“LOKI!!”

Tony's voice echoed through the sudden silence, a hoarse cry half drowned by the thump of the god's scorched body hitting the floor. Only a split-second and he had turned the machine off, then pushed aside everything barring his way with a loud metallic clattering and almost fell over his own feet to get to Loki's side. The stench of burned flesh hit him mid-air like a thick wall and triggered a merciless irritation in his throat, causing a nasty coughing fit. Nevertheless, he covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve, because he had to get closer, he could not wait.

One spirited movement and he pulled out the cable. A bright blue flash exploded from the opening in the god's neck and reflexively, Tony flinched and hurled the cable aside. When he looked at his hand, the whole side was burning red and hurt like a bitch, but it was not his own body he was worried about at the moment. Loki, although rendered unconscious, was still stirring from energy. Blue light pulsed through his entire being, shining through sore skin, emitted from every cell in his body. Yet, the process's decline had already begun and in the seconds Tony needed to approach the trickster, the radiance had already started to fade.

What remained was the harsh truth of burned, blistered flesh and singed hair, clothes still steaming from the encounter. The appearance of somebody who had gambled too high, the price you had to pay for receiving unlimited power – unlimited power for a body still bound to the limits of matter. Blind panic rushed through his veins, making his blood pump twice as fast. What had happened? What to do? Tony cursed silently, wanted to damn Loki for his greed and the Tesseract for her irresistible allure, but all the anger and all the boiling flood of “I told you so!” he wanted to shout at the god were nothing but expressions of his fear.

What if he had killed him?! No, no he was not dead, his chest was still moving. He was not dead. He had not killed Loki. Fuck, but what DID he do then?!

Tony did not dare to touch the god for a couple of moments. His hands were roaming frantically over the still sizzling body, momentarily held back by the heat it still emitted and by the sheer horror he felt when he thought about what he might find out if he inspected the damage done.

Behind him, the noise of occasional electrical discharge and wires melting from the immense heat told that the Tesseract was still awake. Now and then, smaller lightnings met metallic surfaces, clutching to them greedily for a second, as if the cube was affronted that her moment was already over. As if she had tasted blood and now wanted more - a galactic force which held no respect for human, or godly, sacrifice.

Tony did not care, though. If it was up to him, he would have loved to throw the source of so much
terror and destruction out of the window.

Yet, the inventor was here at Loki's side and finally dared to touch his face. No electric shock of several hundred volt burned his nervous system – instead, there was just rough, scorched skin under his fingers and the thundering beat of his own racing heart. Loki lived, that much was certain, he lived and he was breathing. Tony could feel that when his hand ran along the god's face, cupping the side of it for a second to stare at the lifeless features with a pained expression. Fuck, he was such an idiot, such a damned idiot for taking on this exposure deliberately! Every earthly creature would be ten times dead by now, but Loki was still alive – toasted, but alive.

Question was whether he would wake up again – and how he would be like, if he did.

What effects the direct, uncontrolled contact with the Tesseract had had on Loki's mind was unforeseeable - whether it had fried it completely, impaired his sense of reason even further or might have been compensated by the Aesir physique. Frankly, Tony refused to have these thoughts infiltrate his mind right now. He needed to take care of what was there, needed to look after Loki. There would always be time for a nervous breakdown if his worst assumptions turned out right. The more he observed the other's body, had his own hands feeling that this was heavy tissue damage, severe, nasty wounds, but nothing even worse, he felt his heart-beat normalize again. This was something he could handle, something he could take measures against – at least against what he found on the outside.

"Alright, buddy, you gonna be okay. You stupid, stupid idiot."

A firm grip under Loki's shoulders and he started dragging the motionless god along the floor, panting heavily while doing so, because – Jesus! - he was still heavy. Positioning him on the mattress turned out a little more complicated than expected, but he managed. Movements becoming more and more mechanic, he took of the god's clothes, one after the other, throwing the ruined fabric in a corner. Parts of it had melted with upper skin layers and tearing the cloth of the other's skin with a ripping sound was almost nauseating. However, it had to be done, and Tony did it, stoically and with heightened concentration.

Only now, when he could make out the full extent of the other's injuries, he felt a wave of remorse crush him. He had accepted to take part in this operation, he had endorsed Loki's decision and had turned a blind eye on the madness speaking out of him. The least he could do now was make up for his lack of perseverance.

"You power-crazed madman...", he muttered while he got up to get disinfectants and gauze. Strangely, he kept on talking to Loki all the while he was aiding his wounds. Sometimes looking in his face, hoping for a reaction he never got, sometimes merely babbling along to shut up his own inner voice, he found numerous of ways to explain to the god why he was the biggest idiot in the whole Universe. There were quick, reflexive spasms every time that Tony poured disinfectant on a piece of destroyed flesh and he clung to these little signs of reaction with grim determination. If he reacted to pain, his nervous system was working at least.

It took him almost an hour until he was done. The work with his hands had had a soothing effect on him and had cooled his thoughts a bit, like meditation or making crosswords. Now, silence had set it.

Tony sat back from his kneeling position after he had covered the other's body with the lightest blanket he had found. Then, he looked around.
The room was a mess where the engineer had forced its way through his material and devices. Clattered metallic objects, papers and smaller stuff all over the floor, blood and dark, rusty red smears on the concrete where Loki had been lying on the floor. Finally, the Tesseract had shut up, and now her glow was peacefully illuminating the whole area around, still brighter than before, still agitated.

Tony covered his face with his hands, then ran his fingers through his hair with a tired sigh.

Now that he was sitting here and had done what could be done, he felt an ugly emptiness inside his chest. The thoughts he had been actively pushing back so that he was able to function accordingly, slowly poured in his troubled mind like acid.

What had the Tesseract done to Loki? Had she finally, finally succeeded in taking over his mind completely, snatching it away from the world, from Tony? Would Loki's body regenerate like it always did, deal with the enormous power it had just been filled with like it was the usual battle wound? Or was it different with magical wounds, different even with the Tesseract, because of her unique energy? He had no clue, none at all.

At this moment, in this cellar room at the bedside of a non-respondent God of Mischief and the most powerful cube in the universe only a few feet away, Tony felt so alone like he had never felt before in his life. When Pepper died, it had been so quick and sudden that he had been unable to believe it at first. His breakdown had befallen him a few days later, but even then, alone in his house in Malibu, the feeling of such existential loneliness had never hit him that hard.

There was a difference when the person you loved was dead, gone forever without a chance of return and when there was still a world existing around you to which you could return potentially – even if you did not want to. It was something else entirely to throw away everything what had once been yours, to make yourself dependent on one person alone, to start needing this person without even realizing it and then almost lose that person out of your own inanity.

Without Loki, he did not give a shit about that blue shiny thing over there. Without him, all of this meant nothing – there would be no revenge, no plan, no new suit, no final battle. Without Loki, he did not even want any of this.

The thought hit him from behind, surprised him in its clean, distinct appearance and left him with a sour taste in his throat and the wish to ram his fist against the wall.

What was the sense of all of this when, in the end, he lost the one person who somehow mattered to him?

A snarled, angry sound left his lips and he heaved himself up from the floor, avoiding to look down on Loki again. With determined steps, he approached the equipment, pushed it aside with more force than necessary, and removed the Tesseract from her place. Unlovingly, he wrapped the cube in a piece of cloth and hurled it in the darkest corner of the room.

As there was nothing better to do, he returned to the mattress. Eyes fixed on the god's face, he remained there for a while, God knew how long. Minutes of hours, it did not matter. In the end, fatigue overcame him with its merciful blackness, and he fell asleep on the cold, concrete floor at the other's side.
After the blazing heat and burning white light, there was cold - a deep, numbing cold he had never felt before. It came with utter darkness, engulfing his mind as a welcome relief. He was lost, lost in the void all over again, only that this time, there were no distant stars to ensure him that he had not simply ceased existing. There was nothing - he did not even mind. It meant that there would be no more pain, no more fire eating away at his insides, and so Loki gave in willingly and let himself be devoured by pure blackness.

Only that it did not last.

One moment, there had been nothing but the void, nothing but welcoming cold and the next second, a bolt of white light rushed from the base of his skull down his spine. Suddenly, all of the sensations returned as his body came back to life and his muscles went stiff with the agony flaring up.

He opened his eyes wide, jolting towards somewhere, anywhere, although he did not even know where to. Loki hit something solid - a wall - with a loud thud, and as it did not give in, he stopped moving completely and curled into himself, still half-tangled in the blanket.

Disorientation, blurred vision and a high-pitched ringing in his ears – that was everything he could perceive for the moment. And pain, inside his head and all over his body.

Only distinctly, Loki noticed that he was naked, with only a blanket curled around his legs and something stiff covering parts of his skin, soft to the touch of his skin, yet unmoving. Something thick and soft was latched to the side of his face and Loki tried to remove it with shaking fingers, but the attempt only led to stinging pain all over the side of his head. Reflexively, he removed his hands and he kept still, head leaned against his drawn-up knees.

Nevertheless, the shaking did not stop, nor did the pain subside in any way. His muscles twitched every few seconds, as if unfocused energy would surge through them, while some parts of his body felt completely numb, even when he let his fingers ghost over the surface.

A sudden movement from the corner of his vision attracted his attention and Loki's breath stopped for just a moment, the tautness in his body making it impossible to draw air.

He kept quiet and did not move, stared straight forward against the bare skin of his legs – his vision did not reveal anything except movements, blurred and deprived of every color.

“Loki.”

The noise of something coming closer, then a hand on his face, the uninjured side, guiding his head to look at the being in front of him.

The fingers were warm, not like the scorching fire from inside his body, pleasant even – their movements were feathery, almost caressing, calming, and the gesture left a tingling sensation on his skin.

Loki blinked and shifted his head to lean into the touch, exhaustion guiding his actions. When his vision did not clear and remained a gray haze, he closed his eyes again. The tension faded from his muscles, although the uncontrolled twitching continued, and he sagged against the body close to him.
Just awoken, he was already at the verge of drifting away into the darkness a second time - there was just not enough strength left for his mind to stay focused on the already blurred reality.
A hand against his shoulder steadied him and lifted him to lean back against the wall, while the one on his face tried to lift his head.

“Hey, stay with me. Open your eyes.”

Loki blinked again, tried to straighten his posture and shake off the dizziness that threatened to cloak his mind again.
When he finally forced himself to stare at the person in front of him, he made out the contours of a face, dark hair and even darker eyes, everything still an almost indistinguishable blur.

He stared at the other and asked the first question that came into his mind:

“Who are you?”

A movement in the face in front of him: a mouth opening in a surprised manner, then closing again as the dark orbs that were the other's eyes were squinted in suspicion and the head cocked to the side.
Then, a small, knowing grin crept on the other's features.

The sight, although blurred, disturbed Loki. The baring of teeth made him nervous and the comforting hand on his cheek had vanished as well. It had dropped away the moment he had uttered his question, leaving his skin exposed to the cold and dry air of the room.

When Loki did not say anything else, the grinning on the man's face died down and the expression changed to unmasked shock.

“You mean that, do you?”

Loki felt panic rising, engulfing him with cold fingers that squeezed his lungs and heart. What was going on? Where was he, and even more, where did all these wounds come from?
Who was this person in front of him – an enemy, keeping him captured?

“Tell me your name!”

This time, the other's undertone was more urgent, pressing – he did not know how to react if the person in front of him would suddenly turn out to be hostile.
Just when he had formed that thought in his head, a hand shot out in his peripheral vision and hit his cheek with a loud smack.

During the first seconds, Loki was too shocked to react at all – then the pain began to flare up at the side of his face, increasing his throbbing headache even further.
Staring dumbstruck at the man in front of him, the god's eyes slowly widened in disbelief which, after a few endlessly long moments, abruptly changed to exasperated anger, fueled by a sudden rush of panic.

He did not even notice that he was moving - the entire process more a reflex than conscious action - but a second later, he had grabbed the other's hand, the one he had just been hit with, pressing it down onto the ground with more force than his physical condition should actually allow.
However, the sudden movement was more than a little painful and Loki grimaced – he could not keep this up for long, that much was sure. The man would most likely be able to fight back without much effort, once he regained his composure.

“How dare you attacking me... tell me, where am I? What happened? And who are you,”
He took in the entire appearance of the person in front of him before he came to a conclusion.

“...mortal.”

The last word was merely a low hiss.

“Right, right, keep your cool!”

The other's voice now sounded differently, hectic mixing into his words when he blurted out an explanation.

“You've been hurt by an experiment with a strong source of magical energy and apparently lost your memory. I'm your partner, we're... we're friends. Just stop squishing my wrist, for Christ's sake!”

Loki withdrew his hand as quickly as he had put it on the human's wrist and leaned back against the wall, exhausted from the movements, his eyes almost falling shut.

The mortal's words were somewhat calming for him, although he knew they were not to be trusted. Yet, the man had cooperated so far, had given information - but also had tried to attack him. After some time, Loki forced his eyes open again. Certain it was a lost fight, he still knew he could not show too much weakness, not in front a stranger that was probably dangerous.

He noticed how the other looked to the side, gaze lost in the distance, before he eventually focused back on Loki and continued speaking.

“What's the last thing you remember?”

“Asgard. I remember Asgard. And my family.”

Loki response came quietly, not more than a mumbling, his tongue feeling heavy from exhaustion, thoughts moving sluggishly. It was hard to keep his head straight, so he let his eyes cast down onto his hands. Damn, he felt so tired and weak that he could barely endure to sit up straight – he might have just fallen over if not for the wall to support his back.

The small assault on the man had cost him a lot of energy and had only been fueled by the sudden panic and stinging pain the slap in the face had caused him. The last remains of this energy were melting away like ice in the midday sun.

“Oh fuck.”

The mortal's groan made Loki look up again, just to watch him run a hand through his dark hair in an annoyed gesture.

“You still haven't told me your name.”

The moving stopped, and the human looked at him – at least he saw the black spots that were the other's eyes glancing in his direction.

“I'm Tony. Tony Stark.”

“Tony.”

Loki repeated the name as if the taste of the word would return the memory he was told he should have. Yet, there was nothing, neither a memory of the man, nor the place they were in. It was not difficult to assume that he was on Midgard, though – but why should he be on Midgard,
much less in company of a mortal man, hidden in a dark hole under the ground?

Merely thinking about the endless possibilities and unsolved questions made the burning inside his head increase, and so he leaned his head back against his knees, eyes closed, and tried to blend out the pain. With every passing second, it became harder and harder to bear, until the pain became so strong that he feared to throw up.

So much about staying alerted, not showing weakness – he had no chance. He was barely able to keep his body in a sitting position. Loki drew a deep breath, then crawled back, over to the mattress he knew was only a few feet away.

He laid down onto it, face tightly pressed against the fabric, breathing heavy through his nose, with his eyes tightly shut. Yet, the headache did not cease – the pulsing pain became worse with every breath he took.

The mortal at his side had not uttered another word, but Loki did not even care any longer. There was only one though occupying his mind: he needed the pain to stop. The merciful dizziness from a moment before had vanished, replaced by agonizing clarity. Scorched skin and damaged nerves demanded his attention.

The first natural instinct was to simply heal himself - it would take nothing but a little bit of his magic running free in his body. A simple trick...

Yet, when he called for the energy stored within him, another bolt of agony rushed through his head, drowning all thoughts in white.

Loki’s tormented scream was muffled by the thick fabric of the mattress beneath him. Fortunately, everything fell back into darkness a second later.

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Tony stared at Loki's back with a long, worried look. Every shiver from the hurt body, every hissed, pained breathing was hard to endure, even as a spectator. Yet, his confusion about time and place was worse, a lot worse. He did not even know exactly how much of a mess the Tesseract had made of Loki's head, but from what he could deduct now, it looked like they were generally up shit's creek.

Still, there was nothing he could do at the moment other than wait.

He leaned forward a last time to cover the other's body with the blanket again, movements careful and precise, causing as few skin contact as possible. When he was just above Loki's head, he bent down, halting when his mouth was only inches from the god's ear.

“I dare you to back out of this now, Loki. Man up and get your thoughts straight again.”

Tony did not receive an answer and he was unsure whether the other had even heard him right, since it already looked like he was unconscious again. Eyes darting around nervously under closed eyelids, lips parted slightly, releasing rasped breaths, Loki looked terribly exhausted, feverish even.

The inventor's voice dropped to an urgent, insisting whisper.

“Come on! I need you, mate.”

He remained in his position for another few seconds, before he eventually got up again in a smooth movement.
There was nothing he could do for Loki now.

In this moment, he wished for Bruce. He wished for the man's medical skills and for his calming nature – he needed a doctor and a few assuring words from a person who had the practice and experience it needed to sound trustworthy upon saying “It's going to be alright.”. He knew that he could have been of help – he had already proven himself useful one time. However, he was on his own on this morning and he was by far no medic, so he had to carry on with what was necessary. As long as things were uncertain, he needed to continue as if they had not changed in the first place.

Certainly, Loki would remember once he was awake again.

Stepping over scattered devices, papers, tin cans and other trash, he turned on the computers. The subterranean room was filled with the noise of machines stirring to life and a few small sparks emerged from the end of the cable which had been connected to Loki's brain. Now, the piece was lying on the floor and Tony felt a strong urge to crush it with his foot. He decided differently.

“Morning, Jarvis. You see the mess, I need you to pinpoint for me the exact moment where it has gone wrong.”

“Recorded data suggests that at the point of 74% of transmission, controlled energy supply failed. We have a sudden increase from 74.1% to 249%, immediately followed by a complete withdrawal of all energy back to an estimated less than -20%.”

The engineer frowned, then threw a quick glance back to Loki on the mattress. This explained a lot.

“No only it left him with nothing from her own energy, she even divested him of his.”

“So it seems, yes.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully, then scratched the stubble of his beard. He stared at the concrete wall for a while, trying to reconstruct why exactly his system had failed. In his calculations, he had run scenarios up to 300%, knowing fully well that the Tesseract was changeable and incomputable. His math had been accurate, up to five decimal places – there were reasons he had needed several days for a task usually solvable within one or two.

And still, now he had it: worst case scenario.

“The math was right.”, he stated in the silence of the cellar room.

“Sir, not meaning to insult you, but perhaps your undoubtedly right calculations have been made on wrong assumptions.”

The genius scrunched his face, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. A headache was building up behind his eyeballs.

So, an error somewhere along the line of his thought process, leading to an error in the final construction, leading to all of the Tesseract's energy flooding Loki's magical nervous system in a split-second, leaving him drained and burned out from the inside – perhaps having burned out the last, deciding years of his life forever.

“Shit.”, he hissed between clenched teeth.

With a loud bang, he smacked his flat hand on the table, enjoying the jolt of pain it caused. Then he pushed himself up from the chair and off the table, to get to the machine. He might be unable to
find and eliminate the error he had caused in Loki's head, but he certainly would take that machine apart, if necessary even to the last screw, to know where he had gone wrong.

Whether he would ever use it a second time was a completely different story. Better not to think that far.

“What's the statistic on remaining retrograde amnesia after a traumatic event?”

A piece of metal fell to the ground after it had been unscrewed, revealing an unhindered look on the insides of the machine.

“By the current state of scientific knowledge, there are no definite numbers, since every case is considered unique.”

“And temporary?”

“Again the numbers vary. Renowned papers suggest the return of memory within a spectrum of a few hours without additional input up to several years of intensive therapeutic treatment.”

“Ah...”

In the other room, he could hear Loki let out a small pained gasp in his sleep.

Loki awoke again after what felt like some hours. Tony heard the changed rhythm of his breathing, even from the other room. Without a sound, he listened to the rustling and shifting, then he eventually got to his feet and approached the doorframe.

Loki had sat up on the mattress, trying to remove the bandages on his arm with more or less manual accuracy, throwing the sullied pieces aside. Once his skin was revealed – it still looked awful, black and rough, here and there already splitting off – he regarded the his arm.

Tony did not intervened, just watched, breath held when he saw how Loki, tentatively, tried to peel off the dead skin from his upper arm. A second later, he bared his teeth and let out a hissed noise of pain, then he let it be.

Only now, when he was about to lie back onto the mattress, he seemed to notice Tony standing in the doorway, staring at him with a sorrowful expression.

Loki stared back at him, but even before he said a word, the genius could detect no sign of recognition. He still did not remember...

Then, the trickster's expression changed for a second, surprise manifesting in his eyes.

“You saved my life once, did you? Before this incident here. I was ill, and you saved me.”

It was more a statement than a question and for a second, hope dared to grow inside of Tony. Not everything was lost - maybe it was just buried somewhere. Years of therapy his ass! Fueled by this sudden spark of memory, he left the doorframe and hurried over towards the god, hunkering down in front of him.

"There we go!", he said in a satisfied tone, ignoring the skeptical look Loki gave him.

"Anything else in there? Let's play a game of jeopardy: Enormous energy-source, formed like a cube? Secret intelligence agency with dubious goals? Eehm, Alien race, trying to conquer earth, using your enormous inferiority complex for their purposes?"

Apparently, Loki did not like to play jeopardy.
Instead, he crawled backwards a little bit when Tony closed the distance between them so suddenly, his face obviously much too close and voice too loud for the wounded god.

"Stop it.\text{", he hissed, excessive demand causing pain, causing hostility. One of his burned hands immediately went up to his forehead, to keep the increasing headache in check.\text{"

"I don't remember anything else."

Quickly, hope turned into frustration again.
Tony was neither a very patient man nor had they the time to play these games for longer than a few days. Additionally, to meet his urge to find out where he had gone so fatally wrong, he had skipped breakfast.

Until now, he had not found the error and it was driving him mad and now, this tiny spark of hope was trampled on once again. There was nothing positive about this situation – actually, it was rather ridiculous. They had calculated with every risk, they had let themselves be captured, only to use it to their advantage, they had outsmarted two of the best assassins this world had to offer and they had made it within arm's reach to the finish line.

Still, here he was, trying to remind Loki – Loki! - about his mission to become the mightiest magician all the universes had ever known. Not to mention the part of gruesome revenge...

With an unnerved groan, he let himself slump on the floor, before he immediately scrambled on his feet again like stung from a poisonous spider. Loki's gaze followed him when he left the room, grabbing himself one of the package of Marshmallows on the counter on his way out. Seconds later, he returned with a crumpled piece of cloth in his arm. From its insides, a blue, unaltering glow illuminated the dirty garment.

The Marshmallow package dropped to the floor, then was followed by the inventor himself.

"There's a huge part of me screaming 'No!' in this instant, might be my neglected common sense, but I think if there's nothing which will stir your blood just like this."

Like a bad party-magician revealing the final result of his trick, he opened the clothing around the glowing cube, his gaze not fixed on the Tesseract herself, but on the bluish lit orbs of Loki's eyes which widened in surprise and awe at the sight of the cosmic cube.

"How did you get it?!"

And yeah, there was excitement again, excitement and greed, curiosity and fascination – but the words definitely were not the ones Tony wanted to hear. Evidently, his excitement overtook his former waryness and common sense, since Loki's hands acted faster than his brain and he reached out to take the square piece of energy.

The engineer had no time to react before it was too late: Upon impact, a bolt of energy shot through Loki's entire arm and with a startled cry, Loki let go of the Tesseract.

Breathing heavily, he clutched his hurting hand against is abdomen, staring at the cube with widened eyes.

"Ah-ah-ah! No touchy! I strongly recommend you to avoid any contact with our precious lady until both your mind and body are fully recharged."

Tony's jovial tone only poorly masked his disappointment about the fact that not even the cosmic cube had the desired effect on Loki's memory. It was enough to drive him up the wall!
Casually, he covered the Tesseract again to put her aside – with the time he had spent working with
that cube, he had lost a bit of his former respect for her. If not plugged in a machine, you could as well use her as a shiny paperweight.

When he looked back to Loki, the god still had his hand clutched to his chest, although his gaze had followed the shining blue cube. In this moment, he just looked plain pitiful: badly hurt, still completely oblivious about his whereabouts and the circumstances which had brought him here, bombarded with more and more input he was obviously not ready to cope with.

The inventor decided to shift down a gear.

With an exhausted sigh, he focused his eyes on him and presented him a lopsided smile. The other did not smile back though, still utterly confused by what was happening, but let his hand be removed from his chest and inspected upon further injuries. There were none, fortunately, but Tony did not come up with a better gesture to comfort Loki.

Eventually, he released his hand, opened the bag of Marshmallows and took two of them, offering the rest of the package to Loki.

“I know you don’t like them, but maybe you change your mind after a second first try.”

Despite the fact that amnesia offered a shitload of punchlines, he could not bring himself to find this the least bit funny (well, maybe a tiny little bit).

“Would you consider it helpful if I brief you about the How's and Why's of our current situation?”

Loki who had been chewing on the pink piece of food, grimaced and swallowed it down reluctantly before he managed to answer.

“I would be grateful,.... Tony.”

It sounded a bit off how he said his name, but the engineer did not mind. Thinking back to how everything had actually started made him realize that he had to reach back at least 6 years to make everything completely clear, but he went for the short version instead. If there was just one word which would turn the switch... one word to bring his Loki back, the Loki he needed right now. The Loki who would probably rip his ass open once he got to know that Tony had miscalculated the machine directly plugged into his central nervous system.

“I don’t actually know where to begin... So, you came to earth one day, about two years ago, to blow shit up and rule mankind for whatever reasons - because you were not allowed to be king at home, always lived in the shadow of your brother, are the adopted bastard child, broke with your family and decided to - what?”

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Loki stared at the mortal, brows knitted in utter confusion. He could hear the words, understand their meaning, yet they made no sense to him.

Adopted? Ruling Mankind? Attacking Midgard?

If he had been confused before, he felt simply dumbfounded now. Additionally, a spark of fear crawled up his spine at the human's words, causing a cold, ugly feeling in his chest. They could be lies, yes, lies to make him act obedient, to let the other have power over him. A very distant part of his mind, however, whispered to Loki that he was telling the truth –and there was even less sense in that.

Loki decided to take the offensive.
"You are talking nonsense. What by Yddrasil should I possibly want from your mortal realm? There is nothing I would wish to gain here – and don't you dare querying my heritage ever again. I am not adopted, I am a son of Odin."

"You can bet your ass that you are."

"Liar."

"Thor told me."

The mortal's reply almost sounded smug, his look a little bit amused about Loki's confusion.

The god was seduced to wipe that expression off his face with a well-aimed punch, but he knew that this would not help him.

Instead, he focused on something else, trying to make this creation of lies collapse.

"So, do tell me then: where is Thor? How can I know that you're not the one who brought me in this situation to gain advantage over me and talk me into something I would never do if I was in my right mind?"

"Oh, that's sweet. Now I'm the one taking advantage of other people do make them do crazy stuff - like leaving your home, blowing it with your mates and going for a kamikaze revenge-mission."

The human's tone was biting, apparently growing tired of the situation. Loki knew that he had to be careful not to anger the other one, as long as he did not know all the variables of this situation. It was only a mortal, but he could still harm him if he wanted to, especially while he was weakened.

"Your good brother is in Asgard, sweeping up the pile of flinders which once has been your invincible realm. There was, or is, a war going on. Against the Chitauri, you should know them, you made a pact with their leader once. God, it's hard to always know everything better than others, but this - this is torturous. Please stop that right now, will you."

The mortal merely received a distrustful stare for the way he twisted reality with words and painted a picture which sounded too horrible to even be considered true.

Loki knew the Chitauri, or at least he had read something about them, a vague mention in a book, yet nothing more. Whatever had happened, it could not be true. Loki did not want it to be true. If he thought realistic, something like that was basically possible, it would at least explain how he could have ended up in a situation like this. Strangely, there was no panic dwelling up inside of him, at least not on the surface.

Somehow, he knew it was there, though. He felt its foreshadowing, and he felt that it would probably burst out of him unhindered once he would let down his guard.

The human was not deemed worthy for an answer and Loki merely rested his chin on top of his knees in a curled-up position, turning away from the other to stare at the opposite wall.

When he did not hear the man leaving after a few moments of mutual silence, he peeked back over his shoulder, to look at the other's still slightly blurred face.

"That experiment you mentioned... it involved the Tesseract, didn't it? I can hear it talking to me, even though I'm not close to it. However, the meaning of the words defy my understanding."

Loki chose his words carefully, testing the eventual reaction. He did not expect what he was about to discover, though.
"Feel your neck."

Loki obeyed, reaching up – by the Norns, when had his hair grown so incredibly long? - and felt along his neck, until suddenly, his fingers brushed over something metallic, deeply implanted into the base of his skull.

"What in the Nine Realm's is...?"

The god's eyes widened in surprise and the movements of his fingers grew more erratic, picking at the metallic surface with his nails. Yet, the metal remained unmoved and even the slightest pressure caused the burning headache flare up anew.

He better kept himself from touching the object – whatever it was.

The mortal watched him with interest, his right hand grasping for the back of sweets he had offered Loki before, stuffing one of the white things in his mouth before he answered.

"You can not access the energy directly, therefore I implanted a kind of... converter in your spine and skull. Several, actually. You should be able to access the Tesseract's energy and use it for your magic, but an error of still unidentifiable nature occurred and the energy... wiped out everything important up there."

He gestured vaguely at Loki's head, then took another Marshmallow and chewed thoughtfully.

Loki turned back to the human, his interest reawakened at the discovery of the device in the back of his skull. Yes, this was it - he felt his mind getting clearer with every moment.

Apparently his healing was as fast as always and was quickly repairing the damage done to his body, so logically, his mind was soon to follow.

The scorch marks all over his skin were itching awfully while the layer of irreversibly damaged skin renewed itself. It was too tempting to peel the dead remains off, but he knew it was only impeding the healing process.

At least at this stage of healing, he would probably do even more damage than help. Instead, he finally decided to picked one of the fluffy white sweets. They tasted awful, but he felt incredibly hungry, despite his headache.

The god looked at the human while he chewed, thinking. Tony had also fallen entirely silent and was eating now. The situation felt strange, sitting in a dark cellar hole, naked except for the blanket around his legs and hips and eating some strange Midgardian sweets with a mortal.

At the same time, the way said human acted made the whole thing appear entirely casual.

"I think I will remember. Although I'm not sure if I want to remember these things."

"That's not the point, Loki. You better do, quickly. Otherwise this whole endeavor has been nothing but a joke. A pretty bad one, actually."

The words sounded final, almost angry at what Loki had said before and he could only guess what it would mean to that other man if he did not remember at all. What this endeavor might have been, what they had done before...

With this, Tony removed himself from the floor again to leave Loki be.

The god knew that his words sounded selfish, but if he was honest to himself, he was scared. Scared of the things that were still hidden in his head, because one thing was sure:

Those were no pleasant memories.
He still did not know what exactly had transpired, but apparently he had went on a rampage on Midgard somewhere along the way, together with the Chitauri, who now were waging war on the humans and Asgard.

Yet, there seemed to be lurking even more: Tony had mentioned something about an adoption and deep within his consciousness, he felt there was a whole avalanche of knowledge, waiting to drown him.

Maybe, this was the right time to panic. Strangely, he found nothing but a deep resignation, though, growing stronger the longer he bothered his head about these things. His only hope was that remembering would not be too painful.

A heap of clothing carelessly thrown in a corner caught the god's attention.

He moved forward and grabbed the entire pile with his outstretched hand. The material was dark, black and gray - and burned. Probably the clothing he had worn during the experiment. He threw the shirt back in the corner, since it was scorched entirely and barely recognizable as a piece of clothing, yet he put on the somewhat bigger, jacket-like. Then, he took the pants and put them on, too – Loki had no qualms about being naked, but only as long as he felt safe. Which he definitely did not, right now.

Now dressed almost properly again, he lied back down onto the mattress, shifting until he had found a position where his wounds had the least contact with the fabric of the mattress. Maybe sleep would return his memories to him, or maybe, he would just wake up to discover that this whole strange encounter had been nothing but a way too realistic dream.

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Leaving one area in need of improvement behind, the genius turned to the other one still waiting for him, returning to the opened body of the machine.

Even though he did his best not to let it shine through, the whole talking with Loki frustrated him endlessly. Not just the fact that the continuous repetitions of what had already been established weeks ago was tiring - he felt like talking to a stranger. With nobody to share the events of the past days and weeks, they felt unreal, far away and strangely insignificant.

If he was honest to himself, it was scaring him.

Even when Loki would remember - right now, he was almost 99% certain that he would - he knew that the day would come when the whole thing would be over. There would come a day when Loki would dart off to rule some other universe or two with his newly gained power and he, he would still be here, probably. Here on earth, with the Chitauri successfully eliminated and his revenge taken at best - dead or in a prison cell for the rest of his miserable life at worst.

The thought of being left alone, now, after he had left everybody else, was hardly bearable.

After he had left the small room in which they had stored their mattresses, he leaned against the cellar wall, the back of his head meeting cool concrete. For a few seconds, he closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing through his nose.

He would give Loki this day. The next one, too, if absolutely necessary - if the god would not remember more than vague, distant feelings of familiarity with the Tesseract's incomprehensible whispers, it might happen that Tony would throw a tantrum.
So, he sat down with pen and paper, directing his thoughts to circuits, metal and plastic. That in this moment, somewhere out there, Natasha and Clint were closing up on them was certain. He pushed the thought aside for the moment, relying on their sophisticated choice of their hideout and his suit.

However, getting company was probably the least thing they could need right now.

Almost desperately, the inventor threw himself into his work.

When Tony found where the error in his construction had occurred, it was almost too easy to be true. Of course, it had a fundamental impact on the functionality of his machine, yet the idea alone that he had been wrong to such a minimal extent was maddening. He actually cursed loudly at the realization, remembering Loki sleeping in the other room only when his own voice echoed from the cellar walls. Yet, when he checked for him, the god had not awoken - he had fallen asleep about an hour after their last conversation and had not made a sound ever since.

Naturally, Tony fixed the error in the current working session. It was still daytime, they had eaten 'breakfast' barely two hours ago, why should he do something else than sitting on the floor in a crouched position, fiddling with wires as fine as nerves, hardly distinguishable from the background in the poor light. That was the only thing he did, the only thing working. In the end, the whole procedure turned out to be more complicated than originally thought which was the reason why it was dark when the engineer was finally done.

The nightly air smelled heavenly after hours in the sticky cellar, even considering their momentary surrounding. He inhaled deeply, then rolled his stiff neck and stretched his aching shoulders, before a yawn forced its way on his face. Finally, he felt tired, almost contently tired. He was exhausted and his head was aching, but this time, he was sure he had done nothing wrong. If only Loki was... in his right mind again, he would totally test it on him. Immediately, despite his burning eyes and his headache.

After a last, careful look around, Tony turned towards the house again and stepped back down the stairs into the cellar room.

There, his hand cautiously running along one of the thick cables, was Loki. He had his back towards the inventor, but was standing erect again, able to move like nothing had happened. Unable to suppress it, hope sparked inside of Tony, rushed in his chest like a warm wave, waking up his tired body all at once and leaving him with a tense, yet thrilling anticipation.

"Ready for another try?"

His voice trembled only the slightest bit at the beginning, yet he quickly concealed it with a half-grin, already seeing the intense glimmer in Loki's eyes, the wide grin he would shoot him when he would turn around.

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After awakening once more, Loki found himself at the same loss of memory as before. Only a part of him felt disappointed about that, though. There was still a nagging insecurity on where exactly he was, what had happened, and even less what he was supposed to do now - but at least his
headache had vanished for the greatest part and the colors had returned to his vision, although still blurred.

With his returned senses and the pain subsided to a bearable amount, the urge to explore took over.

Carefully, tentatively, he sat up, then rose to his feet. His legs still felt weak, yet not too weak to carry him, and the constant nausea that had went along with stronger movements for the past day had vanished.

The mortal was nowhere to be seen, and with nothing else to do, the god decided to make a quick journey through the place they were currently living in.

Passing the door frame, he found himself in an ugly cellar-room, a few old desks and a machine in its midst. Thick wires were running all over the floor, and the ground was scorched black at some parts – as was the ceiling above.

 Apparently, this was the place where the unfortunate experiment had happened.

Thoughtfully, Loki stepped forward and reached for a cable with a circular, metallic end. It did not take much guessing to know that this part would fit perfectly into the metal-implant in the base of his skull.

The god shuddered at the mere thought of it.

How in all the Nine Realms could he have been so foolish to allow something like that? It was doomed to end in disaster!

The mortal's voice tore him away from the cable in his hands. He put it back onto the desk and turned around.

"I don't think so. I have no intentions to die, much less for a cause I can't even remember. I'm sorry."

Too quickly to even comprehend, the human's expression changed from mild-excitement to a short glimpse of disappointment, then to an explosion of frustrated anger.

"Oh, COME on, Loki!! You fucking KNOW the cause, you KNOW what's at stake! We both made sacrifices for this, so don't you DARE leaving me in the lurch!!"

Small screws, nuts and bolts fell to the floor with a clattering sound when the mortal banged his hand on the table, causing Loki to flinch back at the sudden movement. The yell rang loud in his ears, and a primal part of his mind screamed at him to either flee or attack.

The human looked as if he was at the verge of going on a rampage, his left hand was clawed into the edge of the desk, knuckles white from the pressure, and he was staring at the god with an wild expression, both begging and damning him at the same time.

A part of him even felt sorry for the mortal, he could imagine what it must feel like to be abandoned in such a situation, could understand the anger.

Still, Loki could not help it: he could not remember anything else than a few fleeting situations and sensations, nothing more, no details, no conversations or eventual plans. He could not even remember what he was supposed to be fighting for. Truth be told, he was scared, too scared to dare participating in an experiment that had almost cost his life again, something that had been strong enough to do damage to his mind, maybe of irreversible nature.

He was lucky to still be able to walk and speak properly.
“I say it again: I'm sorry, but I don't remember a thing and I won't risk even more damage to my body. I'm no warrior, I assume you know as much. I'm not meant to fight in a war like this.”

"Oh, then what are you, fragile little snowflake!"

The human's words were dripping with biting sarcasm, a bitter edge to his tone. It was not fair - as if Loki was doing anything of this on purpose, as if everything he said was nothing but a joke at the expense of the mortal!

It got even worse then, as if something had flipped a switch inside the other's head. Even though he looked incredibly tired, his voice filling the small room entirely and his words were well-aimed like daggers.

"You are the very person unleashing these creepy fellas to earth, I saw you kill with your bare hands and I remember very well the wind blowing in my face when you threw me out of the window. What pussy version of you did I get in exchange? I'm really sorry - believe me, I am - but I prefer the fallen villain edition."

"Who do you think you are, mortal?", Loki hissed back, not willing to take the accusations for something he was not guilty off, but the man only threw his arms in the air in a ridiculous gesture.

"Come on, Loki! This whole 'mortal' thing is so fucking overused by now – if you decide to go amnesia on me, at least do me a favor and be a little more creative than that!"

"Why are you blaming me? It was your machine that did this to me, your-"

"After YOU practically BEGGED me to do it!"

The mortal had strode over to Loki in a matter of seconds and was no violently pointing his finger into his chest, pushing the taller god against the desk behind.

"Stop acting like a coward and get back on that machine. Don't dare to quit now - you have no fucking idea what I gave up to enable you this."

Where he had been shouting before, his words now were spoken quietly, yet he sounded even angrier as on top of his voice. However, Loki did not let himself be intimidated by him, by a mortal smaller than him and beneath his rank and name, not a second time.

"No, I won't do that."

If he would have considered the situation properly, Loki should have seen it coming. Yet, the heat of the moment shrouded his senses and so, the sudden punch hit him entirely unprepared.

It did not hurt much, since it was aimed at the uninjured side of his face, but he was speechless nonetheless.

The mortal's intense glare pierced through his disbelief for a few seconds, then he turned around abruptly to walk away, only stopping in the door frame to the sleeping room. He did not look at Loki when he spoke the next words.

"You know what? If that is your final answer, you can get the hell out of here. It's Loki I need, not need a little sissy prick who doesn't want to fight."

Loki did not move from his position at the desk, he could only stare at the mortal with wide eyes.

The man suddenly moved anew, reaching for something out of his field of vision before he threw it – something metallic that missed him only by a few inches.
“I said: Get. The Fuck. OUT!”

These words finally pulled the switch in Loki’s brain and he felt his feet moving forward, towards the stairs at the end of the room – yet his gaze never left the human standing in the doorway, staring at him with uncovered anger.

The god only turned away when he had to climb the ladder that led out into the open. He pushed the wooden doors aside, then freezing cold air met his face with harsh reality.

Then he was outside, in the dark.

Once he had moved a few feet away, he heard the doors closing again, and the last dim lights from inside vanished, leaving him in an almost complete blackness, if not for the distant glow of the sky above.

Slowly, Loki’s legs started moving, a little bit unsteady, yet not threatening to give in. He felt the cold seeping through the little clothing he wore, but it did not really bother him – it never had.

He had worse problems right now, lost somewhere on an Midgardian wasteland, with no memory, no idea where to go.

One thing was certain, though – he would not return to the mortal.

Chapter End Notes

Late again?
We're sorry, but busy life is busy xD
But hey, 9500 words, I think that is okay :D Somehow we're incabable of making short chapters :P

Yes, Tony is kind of a jerk in this chapter.
That had escalated quicker than expected...

Tony needed a few minutes too calm down after Loki had left. His blood was still boiling and he was pacing aimlessly through the cellar rooms, randomly picking up stuff from the floor here and there, tidying up the mess he had made. His hand still hurt from the blow, a tickling, burning sensation, but somehow he enjoyed the subsiding pain. When he was eventually breathing evenly again, his gaze went to the cellar door, almost expecting the other to have come back.
Of course, he had not.

To be honest, he did not know anybody with an amount of pride small enough to simply swallow down what the inventor had just hurled at the god - and Loki's pride, was, well...

In the periphery of his thoughts, it dawned him that he maybe should be running after him right now, say sorry, fix what he had broken in this stress-induced hissy-fit, but he was both stubborn and tired and the chance that Loki would regain his memory within the next few days was not high enough for him to make him roam the streets of this abandoned shithole of a city.

If Loki would remember, though, he would definitely come back on his own, that was for sure. If for the Tesseract, or to give Tony payback for his insufferable behavior, or perhaps just because there was no other alternative.
Yeah, that was it, actually. There was no other alternative - and with this heated little fight, he had just lost his only option. Maybe running after him it was, after all...

"No, I need to sleep. Definitely time for a nap."

Now alone again, he merely spoke to the silence around him, nodding in acknowledgment of his own decision. He received an answer, still.

"I would strongly recommend to go after him, Sir. Otherwise your estimated chance to survive, much less survive successfully completing your operation, loses double digits."

"And you sleep, too."

A definite pressing of the off-switch and Jarvis who had just dared to start listing up the variables he had included in his calculation, went quiet immediately.

Tony actually slept, even slept through the night.

Upon waking up, his head felt slightly dizzy, a bit like being hungover, but not really. Could be because he ate not enough lately. Scratching his head through the mess of his tousled hair, he propped himself up on his elbow, his first glance, as always, going over to Loki's mattress, where-

Loki.

Loki was gone.

He had sent Loki away in a rain of unjustified insults, calling him a spineless coward because he could not remember and because Tony was fucking terrified of exactly the situation he had brought
himself into now: being alone.
Why had he not went after him??!
With a long drawn-out groan, he congratulated himself with a facepalm, then hurried to scramble to his feet.

Loki was somewhere out there, had spent the night in a city he had no memory of. He might have been found by the assassins, he might have killed them or had been killed by them. Probably, his brain had decided to work again and Loki had left completely, finally having seen that his dealings with Tony Stark were essentially a waste of time. Fuck, he needed to find him - immediately.

The next thought came to him so naturally that he did not even think about the time passed since he had last worn it - but now, the suit was exactly what he needed.

From the corner, where he had stored the neatly folded metallic parts of it, they assembled almost soundlessly around his body when he called for them. The faceplate closed in front of his eyes and the HUD flared up, already loading the geographic details of his surrounding.

Of course there came a precocious comment from his A.I. about him finally coming to his senses, but he ignored him for once.

He almost tore the cellar door from its hinges when he opened it, but then made sure he carefully closed it again. Even though he was faster with the suit and had a far wider range he could cover, the armor was still a lot more flashy and loud than he was in person. He had to be careful, not fly too high, not do anything unnecessary.

Before he started the thrusters, he hesitated for a second, pondering whether it was safe to leave the Tesseract like this. In the end, he just did - there was no one here and the chances that anybody stronger than he was would find it were rare.

A second later, he was in the air, the thermographic camera searching for Loki.

It did not take him too long to find him, he had not come that far. A green spot – the color indicating that it was barely warmer than the surrounding air-, the silhouette of a person, indicated that he had retreated into a small alley.

There were no words to describe the relief Tony felt the moment he knew Loki was not lost to him, that he could make up his words.

Yet, relief pretty quickly was followed by an intense feeling of unease which grew more and more the closer he came.

When Tony landed in front of Loki, the man crouched on the ground and huddled against the wall looked nothing like the god he knew.

He looked desperate, younger than he actually was and in the same time so much older, every experience of these endless centuries now a distinct mark on his face. Pale skin, dark circles under reddened eyes, hair a mess of black strands, full with dirt and a thin layer of frost.

He had remembered, obviously. Everything.

This was what Loki hid beneath his snide remarks and his royal masquerade, these raw, sore wound of an old soul who had lived through too much. Tony mentally prepared for whatever words would come from the other's mouth, knowing fully well that what he was witnessing here was not meant for his eyes to be seen.

“There you are.”
The faceplate of his dark gray suit risen, he came closer, but the look on his face remained as undefinable as the suit's mask. It was impossible to act casually and his mind was spinning over with finding appropriate words, so, he kept his mouth shut at first.

“I don't want to remember.”

Loki’s voice was hoarse when he uttered just this one sentence under his breath, staring at the inventor's dark eyes. It did not need him to say or do anything, Tony could already see his eyes becoming glassy before he turned away his head to cover his shame. Even now, a situation unbearable for any human mind, Loki could not stand to lose composure.

It was exactly this point, the second the god's shoulders jerked when the first wave of completely silent sobs took over his body, that he felt his heart splinter.

This was Loki at his lowest, worse than Tony had been when the god had found him drinking himself into oblivion in his mansion. It became worse when he realized that he was the sole witness, that he was allowed to see a side of the trickster barely anybody knew about. Not half of what had been silently screaming from Loki's hurt eyes had happened in Tony's lifetime, and he still knew almost nothing about what had made Loki become the person he was today - but this was not important now.

He might not know, but he felt it, everything of it and he knew it was too much to bear, even for a god.

The sight was so rare that it almost worked repellant on the engineer, but he had never considered something too big for him to handle it. Even though he was sure Loki hated him at the moment, just because he was there and saw what was not meant for mortal's eyes, or anybody's eyes in this universe, this was still his friend.

Not for the first time, he truly pitied Loki. Not as an excuse for the deeds he had done, but for the tragedy that was his life. His anger had evaporated the second he had heard in the god's voice that he was back, back to the self Tony had learned to accept, then respect, then trust.

He hesitated merely for a second, then the suit disassembled around his body.

The air around was too cold for just jeans and a hoodie and his breath was coming out in small white clouds, but he did not care. A few steps forward and he knelt down in front of Loki, keeping enough distance not to force something, but close enough to mediate affinity. With a firm grip, he let his hand rest on Loki's shoulder, performing slight pressure with his fingers, comforting the other as good as he could.

For a few moments, he said nothing, gaze unfocused and directed at the wall, lips pressed together. Small, barely noticeable tremors shook Loki's body and Tony just waited, trying to give him time to deal with what had resurfaced.

"It's good to have you back.", he eventually mumbled, not knowing whether this was enough or too much already.

Loki's breath hitched at these words, his sobs audible for a few seconds, before they subsided into silence again.

Only hesitantly, unsure if he was allowed to, he felt the god leaning forward, until his head was pressed against the Tony's chest and he crawled closer, away from the cold wall to the welcoming
Upon contact, Tony's arms automatically moved around the cowering frame, pulling him a little closer towards warmth and closeness, a living, caring body. Obviously, it was enough to make something snap inside Loki. Violent tremors started to run through his entire body, but Tony held him as long as it was necessary, the god's sobs only dulled by the fabric of his hoodie. Like the bursting of a dam, everything broke out of the other, years and years of returned memory Tony did not even dare to imagine.

"I'm so sorry.", Loki eventually mumbled in between, suddenly actively trying to regulate his breathing and return to coherent speech.

"Ah, please. One more word and I'm bursting into tears. I'm serious, I'm going all dewy up here.", Tony answered, trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, cracking a lopsided grin.

Pleased with himself, he noticed the change in Loki's breathing when the god's sobbing was, against his will, interrupted by a chuckle.

"I dare you, Tony."

Still, they remained unmoved for a moment longer, Tony's arms wrapped around the other's back, holding him close. He was poor in dealing with other people's breakdowns, but he could spend warmth if necessary and he was never at a loss for words. That it was Loki he would have to hold like this one day, that was a surprising development, nevertheless, what he was doing felt absolutely right.

In a way, it was his own nonverbal apology, for kicking Loki out when he had been confused and disorientated. It was not enough, sure, but it was what he could do.

When their bodies moved apart again, Tony leaned back and sat on his heels. Watching Loki throw back his head to remove the strands of hair from his face was a common gesture and even though, when their gazes met, his eyes were still glassy and reddened, the inventor knew that he was going to pull himself together. He was the last person to give up on himself.

The two men shared a look, long and meaningful, almost long enough to actually see the other, to read what was going on behind these bright green orbs, now shining even brighter after the tears. For a moment, the depth behind these eyes was sucking him in, making him feel like he was losing his balance from the sheer presence of the other.

Then, Tony got on his feet again, extending a hand to help Loki up. Of course, it was not necessary, but the trickster accepted the gesture without uttering a word.

"Let's get back. I can't feel my toes any more, so..."

“Yes.”

Loki's response was quiet, voice still raw from crying. He brought the sleeve of his hoodie up to clean his face from the tears, looking at Tony with an apologizing expression.

Not taking his eyes off the god, he let his suit assemble around him again, effectively shutting out the cold winter's breeze. Eventually, he started walking – not without looking back at Loki from time to time, checking if he was still there – with Loki following close behind. The other not walking his usual confident strut, but was making only small movements, quiet and
reserved, hands in his pockets and gaze lowered to the ground. It bothered Tony and it occurred to him that it would probably take time for Loki to get well again, that he had wounds which were far too deep to heal within a matter of days.

From all the treatments it would need to right what was wrong in Loki’s mind, what they were doing right now was probably the worst idea, psychologically speaking. The urge to touch him again, to check if he was actually, physically there, was strong, but Tony let the other be.

They arrived back at the cellar and even without any words being spoken during their walk, it was understandable when Loki, without any further comment, walked past Tony and vanished in the sleeping room.

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It had started out only with fragments: random events that did not really make any sense on their own, images of Thor screaming, mortals dying like flies in front of him, the menacing grin of the Chitauri-lord...

Yet, then, it came back to him. All of it at once, came back to him, flooding his mind with images, sensations, smells and sounds, even more vibrant, more intense than when he had felt them the first time:

The confrontation with Odin in the vault, the fall from the Bifrost, the Chitauri, battles, betrayal, being hunted through the branches of Yggdrasil, bone-deep exhaustion and then seeking Tony Stark for help... escaping with him, fighting him, making a friend of him...

The touch of warm hands on his back - and then indefinable, scorching pain.

His memories had befallen him in his sleep and had disturbed his mind with their overwhelming power.

Now, back in the safety of the cellar room, his sleep was numb, dreamless and black. It was two hours later, when Loki returned to the other man. Judging from the light coming in from one of the small dusty cellar windows, it was afternoon.

Tony was sitting in front of the Tesseract's energy extracting machine, the side screwed open and it's metallic intestines exposed to the eye.

The other's presence was almost magnetic for Loki, and so he found himself seated beside the working mortal a few seconds later, watching him work with tired eyes, still not quite returned from sleep.

He felt guilty for running off the evening before, for endangering their whole mission through this single act. In his confused and weakened state he could have injured himself, might have been caught by the assassins and gotten himself killed. Or the same could have happened to Tony, on his search for him.

Their fates were closely connected now, separation impossible - and if either of them acted out of line, it would damage both of them equally, that much had he come to realize now.

Sure, it had been Tony who had told him to leave the cellar, but he had been enough of a coward to follow the demand, endangering both of them.

Maybe it was out of this guilt that he felt as if he owned the mortal an explanation, some personal background that would help to understand his earlier reaction, his fear. There were still too many things untold, to many things hidden away in the depths of his memory, and some of them would never be shared with another being and so, stay hidden forever and keep on doing the damage they did.

Yet, there were also memories that he felt he could share with this particular human, because they dealt with something the other man could relate to, even if only distinctly. He wanted to make him
understand.

Loki had not mentioned them directly before, but had vaguely implied what had happened. If Tony did remember, was an entirely different question.

“I had two sons, with my wife Sigyn, twins. Their names were Nari and Vali. They were children, still far from adolescence, when something happened to them. It was an assault on the royal family, devastating yet poorly executed, sentenced to fail. With a curse, a hostile magician turned Vali into a wolfish beast, and he tore his brother into pieces. There was blood everywhere, and bones, limbs…”

Loki stopped talking for a second, staring straight forward at the wall, caught by the image of his mauled son burned into his mind.

“…but he did not stop then, and the guards had to kill him before I even had the chance to do something.”

He swallowed once, then fell silent again.

Tony's eyes were still fixed on the opened machine in front of him, his fingers kept on doing their job without a single interruption. Loki knew that he was listening, and he saw something flickering in the other's gaze, although he did not look at the trickster once.

It was impossible to say what was going on behind Tony's absent-minded facade right now, if he was shocked, or simply wondering why the god had decided to tell him something like this just now. Admittedly, it was a memory one usually kept to one's self, to keep it locked away as well as one could. It was one of those memories which would always come back to hurt you as much as they had done before.

They remained silent for a while as Tony apparently tried to process this information, still following patterns of wires and connections while doing so. It was hard to tell whether the mortal was aware what it meant to endure something like this, to lose children that – contrary to his own dead and unnamed fetus – he had come to know, had wished for, had named them and played with them. But maybe, the human could relate better than Loki could imagine right now.

He heard how Tony took a deep breath, then mumbled:

"It's never fair, isn't it."

They did not lose another word on it, a silent understanding. It was strange that, even after the words he had yelled at him and how he had treated him the last night, he felt that the mortal really understood. Always noisy Tony Stark understood best when he did not lose a word about it.

Loki watched the human work in silence for the next hours, observed how another small device - an unremarkable piece of metal, yet probably with a lot of impressive wiring inside – was added into the machine. Only vaguely Tony explained to him that the accident during their last experiment had occurred because the flow of energy had been too fast for his body to take on, while his own magic had even added to the effect through responding to the Tesseract and functioning as some kind of magnet.

The problem itself had already been fixed yesterday, and the little additional device was supposed to function as another fail-save, to limit the flow of energy to a steady pace, or shut it down entirely should something go wrong again.
Talking about technology, although still a mystery to Loki, was a nice distraction from their previous talk, full of ugly revelations and a display of weakness the god had never allowed to be witnessed before. He was grateful that the human had not made any further comments on it, had just accepted it and offered a kind of comfort that did not need words.

Later, when the belly of the large machine had been closed again, Tony moved on to work on his suit, to fix small errors, and add a few, necessary additions. The god sat at his side the entire time, not an arm's length away, head resting on the desk and watching the moving hands in front of him with a dreamy expression. Every half an hour or so, he awoke with a slight start, realizing he had fallen asleep again.

It was as peaceful as it would get, like looking out of the window on the morning after a devastating thunderstorm. Also, Loki needed the slow pace and the quietness to find back to himself fully and even though he would not say it out loud, he was thankful to have some rest as a change of pace.

Had there been a bit of slow, relaxing music playing in the background, it would have almost been perfect. Eventually, Tony began to hum a few melodies of Midgardian songs himself, songs that Loki did not know, yet enjoyed to hear nevertheless.

When fatigue began to set in more heavily than before, Loki closed his eyes and drifted away into a light slumber, until he felt a gentle touch on his arm.

His eyes opened again and he looked at the human above, who smiled at him, and Loki could not keep himself from smiling back. The light from the window had vanished completely and even if he could only estimate, he was sure it was deep night by now. Again, there was this wild spark in Tony's eyes that he got after being away in the world of his own head for too long.

“While you've been my sleeping muse, I finished the suit. Allow me to introduce to you: Mark Omega.”

The mortal made a wide, all-embracing gesture to the pieces of machinery spread everywhere over the desk. Loki frowned, his understanding of this ancient Midgardian language telling him that Tony had again being wrecking his brain for the most bombastic references.

“Seriously? Wasn't it you who sad I've got a tendency to be over-dramatic?”

His mumbling was mostly dulled by the arm he had his head resting on, but the smirk that spread over his face was hard to miss and Tony saw it as well.

“If I build an awesome, Tesseract-powered suit, I can name it however I want. Preferably something badass.”

“Always so humble.”, Loki responded snickering, earning him a slight, playful push from the human.

Their light and childish bantering was nothing but facade, but it felt so good after everything that had happened through the last 24 hours. Also, it was their way of showing each other forgiveness, their mutual trust in each other.
For a moment, Tony's hand stayed at Loki's shoulder, where he had originally tried to push him away. They stared at one another a little longer, before the mortal pulled away.

“I think it's sleepy time for me - and probably for you, too. We need you to be well-rested tomorrow. You know, for another try.”

The warmth and coziness of the situation concurred in a matter of seconds as a cold hint of fear pierced through his ribcage at the mention of another experiment. However, his face stayed unmoved this time, mask back in place as it ought to be. He still had not forgotten the agony that had scorched him from the inside out, the panic, the helplessness and the void inside his head. He could not think of having to endure this another time, or the sheer possibility that, maybe, the result would be even more devastating than last time.

Yet, he knew he had to do it. There was no way back -after all, it was what he had wanted all the time.

“I guess you are right.”

With that, Loki rose to his feet, wished the mortal a good night and walked off into the other room, his mind filled with dread of what was ought to happen when he would wake up the next time. Just when he was about to settle down for the night, something at the periphery of his vision distracted him.

It was a sliver of blue that had caught his attention, shining out of a bundle of clothing on the ground.

Loki picked it up, already knowing what was in there, and removed the old piece of fabric that had been used to hide the cube's conspicuous glow. This time, the Tesseract did not scorch him upon contact and he felt nothing but the usual, alluring tingle of energy seeping through his fingertips.

Maybe, everything would turn out alright, after all.

At least, that was Loki's last thought when he finally lied down on the mattress, the cosmic cube tightly clutched to his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Awesome fanart made by Batwynn
Tony was awake at 5 A.M. again - if you could call a condition awake after you had not slept for the whole night.

Still, he did not get up at first, but remained curled up under his blanket for a while longer, not moving an inch, eyes closed. He could hear Loki breathe a few feet at his side, impossible to deduce whether he was awake as well or still asleep. The longer he was awake, pondering about the pros and cons of a second trial, the more he was able to relate to Loki’s fear. It was pure madness what they did, it either needed a good portion of courage to do something like this a second time or you needed to be a prize idiot.

At the moment, the lines blurred alarmingly.

When he had sent Loki out the night before, he had been a complete jerk (with nobody there to tell him so, he became better and better in having those realizations himself). Yet, even when his words had been just tools to vent on Loki, their content completely irrelevant to their function, there had been some truth in them.

He wanted to get on.
He wanted to get out of this hole, he wanted to earn the fruits of his labor. He wanted to have a purpose again. He wanted to feel powerful again and he needed Loki on his side for this.

If Loki had not remembered, he would have deprived him of this purpose - and he would have left him alone. The struggle, causing him to throw the other out when he was at his most vulnerable - fuck, he really needed to send arrange flowers or something - had been keeping him more or less awake the entire night. Only that now, in this early-morning hour, the other side outweighed his set ambition.

Loki was back at his side again. He had apologized to HIM for something he was not even guilty of - Tony was sure he would be unable to cope should he harm Loki another time.

Now that the second trial was imminent and he himself had promoted fast progress, he started to doubt. That Loki’s body was ready, that much was sure - he was a god after all, most of his skin and the tissue beneath had already healed.

It was his mind he was worried about, especially after he had seen the wreck Loki had been yesterday.

Also, a not that small part of him simply nourished the selfish fear that he this time, he might be successful in losing Loki completely. All good things came in threes, so they said. He did not want to count the numerous times he had – be it accidentally or on purpose - almost killed Loki, but if three was bad and it got worse after that, the chances for worse were pretty good.

"Loki."

The other’s name left his lips before he did actually knew what to say and at first, it seemed like the trickster was not even awake, since he kept silent and did not answer. Then, when Tony almost dared to breathe again, the sheets on the other end of the room rustled as the god turned around to look at him.

"What is it?"
"I'm... really sorry. You can not even fathom just how sorry I am. For, uh, several things, actually, but mostly for being a jerk."

The inventor did not look over to Loki, just stared at the dark gray ceiling above, watching the barely visible particles of dust dance in the twilight. When the god answered, you could hear the smile in his voice.

"I know."

He sounded resigned, though, like he knew that being sorry alone did not mean much sometimes. Perhaps he had heard too many sorrys in his incredible life-span, perhaps it was the heavy burden of expectation. The knowledge that today, there would be a second and absolutely last attempt, weighed heavy on both of them and made the silence of the small room feel even thicker, like a lump in the throat.

Suddenly, as if he had just realized that he felt way too much at unease, Tony could hear the god shifted and moved out from under the covers, sitting up.

Quickly, Tony sat up as well, anticipating some kind of overreaction when Loki had suddenly moved. Now, when he was sure that the god would not suddenly run - hell, he would not even resent him for the urge - he relaxed a bit and let his back rest against the wall. Yet, his look was still wary, remaining fixed on Loki's face.

Damn, Loki was shivering – and as it looked like, definitely not from the chilly air in the room.

"I don't know if I can do this."

He was trying hard to articulate well, to prevent the fear from taking over his voice, but it was still there, a distant tremor beneath.

Tony hesitated.

His gaze lingered on the shivering figure in front of him, trying to dig out any good old-fashioned moral support-phrase he could say without feeling himself exactly 30 years older than he actually was. He found none, but got up to his feet in a quick, fluid movement instead. Just when he was about to leave the room, it came too him yet again and he turned to the god on the mattress.

"Do birds know they can fly when they jump from the nest the first time?"

He looked down at Loki, impression unusually serious. The god met his gaze, seconds away from an annoyed eye-roll, but Tony did not give him the time.

"They just do - or die. It's the only option to survive - to bring this horribly corny allegory to a satisfying conclusion."

The small grin at the end was more for show than for real, but the way it looked now, the other needed it. Judging from the way the god presented himself at this point, they would not do anything today. It was early morning, yes, and some terrible things lied past Loki, but never he had experienced the trickster as dispirited as he did now.

Although Loki slowly found back to his usual form over the passing hours of the day, the inventor got the feeling that it actually became worse: As open about his doubts as he had been the night before, he became more and more reserved.

Tony watched without comment how Loki started concealing his thoughts behind an
expressionless face again, yet it was quite obvious that the last word had not been spoken. More than before, he found that Loki had left the cellar this day, to wander about in the closer surrounding or just stand at the door, staring into nothingness.

In the afternoon, Tony had enough. If they did not both back this suicide mission completely, they could just pack their things and deliver themselves to SHIELD - and right now, his own doubts were way over the limit at which he usually said 'Stop'. Yet, this was not 'usually', and so, he made another attempt. Somehow, the comforting and reassuring was a hell lot harder than the actual work he did inside.

Pressing the beanie on his head to cover his ears, he then stuffed his cold hands in his pockets and left the cellar to look for the god.

"With nobody around in the proximity of a few miles, it is mildly suspicious to have you loitering away your time alone outside.", Tony greeted when he had finally found Loki in one of the higher stores of the building.

"I could get the impression that you're actively avoiding me, but that would be ridiculous."

"You think I'm going to run?", Loki asked, without looking at him. He was staring out of the window from which you could barely see more than a wrecked streets with some garbage lying around.

His posture was stiff, eyes kept close to the body, as if he was trying to make himself smaller in the dimly lit room.

The impression was one of a trapped animal, caught in the situation without a chance to escape. He did not exactly look better than a few hours ago.

Tony decided to say nothing for now and remained behind the other, looking around in the former living room they were in to spot any interesting objects. When Loki finally said something again, he sounded like returning from a far away place.

"You know, if the bird falls off the tree on their first try and breaks its wings, it isn't going to fly again."

The genius stopped letting his hand run over a bowl with fake fruits and looked up at Loki's back. Squinting his eyes, he shook his head and came closer with determined steps.

"I found the error, I doubled the safety measures, I built you, like, 3 extra off switches. It's idiotproof."

It was in vain, talking against resignation, exhaustion, fear, yet, in his opinion, there was nothing as convincing as hard science and he was sure that the god had to appreciate that as well.

Loki did not answer, though, his gaze still fixed on something in the distance, some place where Tony could not follow. He still tried, looking over the streets he could see from up here, attention on finding a suspicious red car or any unfitting movements.

There were none.

Everything was completely silent, the peaceful charm of a ghost town.

"I'm an expert, you know. Usually, you can count on my prognosis and when somebody blows up accidentally, it's me. You just fell into a 0.0017% probability and that's just because the matter is foreign to me. It's safe now."

"I know I can trust your abilities, there is no need for self-adulation."
Slowly, Loki had turned around, a small ironic smile had built on Loki’s lips and Tony answered it almost too eagerly, a hint of his usual boyish charm glistening in his tired eyes.

"There's no such thing as need, it comes quite naturally. Don't tell me you want me to pick up the bird-allegory again?"

"I'd much rather have you prepare what we need for later. What is done, is done."

The engineer nodded with joking sincerity, as if just received the ultimate order of a higher being, then gave Loki’s back a quick pat, shooting him a cheery grin. It was only half-honest and they both knew, but he could not need Loki at only 50%.

He needed 100% of him, 110% at best, all of his willpower and endurance for this task.

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Loki stood unmoved in front of the window when Tony disappeared in the cellar again, yet his eyes were following every movement of the mortal until he was out of sight.

Then, when the noise of footsteps vanished entirely, he turned back to stare out of the dirty window.

Despite the fact that he had told Tony to go on with the preparations, Loki's entire body was tingling from anticipation, but not in a pleasant way. It was nagging fear, fear so strong that it seemed to press down on his lungs and heart, slowly suffocating him with its invisible weight.

Loki knew that he had to do it, had to be connected to that infernal machine again, there was no way around – even if every part of his being was averse to do it.

He could barely think of his original aim anymore – the cube's alluring light, the delicious energy were paling compared to the memories of pure pain and utter helplessness.

The god trusted Tony, trusted him not to harm him on purpose, to stay at his side and fight for him. However, trusting into one's personality and spirit did not mean that he had to trust into his abilities as well – and after everything that happened, no one could blame him for not entirely believing into the effectiveness of a metal box and a few wires.

Everything could as easily go wrong as it had at the first time, no matter what the human did. The Tesseract was a being of her own, a force not to be reckoned with. If she thought it fitting, she could overwhelm his mind and body with ease, mar it with no chance of repair – uncaring for Tony's attempts to avoid exactly this outcome.

But did he really have to do it?

What was forcing him to stay? What would happen if he did not?

Almost on their own accord, Loki’s legs started moving, as if he was walking in a dream. Down the several stairs of the house, as quiet as a shadow, not making a noise on the creaky wooden floor.

When he reached the first floor, the front door of the house - a thin, wooden construct, covered in dust – shifted into his field of attention. Pale rays of the winter light where shining trough bullet holes, a faint promise of the freedom lying behind.

There was not even a moment of hesitation when Loki reached out, took the brass handle and twisted it. The door opened with a loud and agonizingly drawn out squeak, and the god would have sworn that Tony must have heard it in the basement, but there was no reaction, no movement from beneath.
Only slowly at first, then with growing pace, he stepped out of the house, pulled the door shut behind himself, and walked down the desolated street.

His mind felt entirely numb, deprived of any feelings of justification, remorse, or shame. His legs only kept moving like an automatism, past empty windows and discarded cars, over layers of cracked concrete and wittered debris.

This time, Loki remembered the way that would lead him out of the city fastest, every spot he knew of the city drawn into his mind like a map.
He did not know where he was going, except that he wanted to get as far away from this hopeless place as possible - out of the city, away from Tony, and away from the Tesseract.
Several minutes later, though, when he found himself facing the wasteland that stretched out in front of him, he stopped.
Behind him lied the city, dead stone structures towering above his head in the distance, the offsets of the suburbs directly in his back.
The sight of the desert in front of him - as empty as it might have been – somehow brought him out of the weird, panic-induced trance he had just found himself in. A harsh, biting wind blew in his face.

What was he doing?
How could he run away like that, leave Tony – who had given so much for this – leave everything he had?
Deep remorse struck him, yet the fear was still there like a block of ice imbedded in his chest.
Loki turned around, facing the city again for a long time, before he finally turned back to the vast wasteland.
The two feelings – the urge to return to Tony, full of guilt, and the maddening fear that drove him to run as far away as possible – were so conflicting that a decision was impossible to be made and he found himself paralyzed on the spot.
In the end, he sat down on the ground of the dusty sidewalk, back leaning against a wall, like a traveler lost on the road with no destination.
He pulled his arms and legs closer to his body when a strong gush of wind tore at his clothing.
"I'll get you a leash."
Loki had heard the mortal approaching, the heavy metal of his boots on the crumbling asphalt was loud enough. Not to mention the brazen noise of impact when he landed, or the general noise of the thrusters.
Yet, the god did not mind to look up at the mortal. Right now, he felt more ashamed than anything else, because it was impossible to hide that the reason why he sat on a dirty sidewalk just outside of the city, was that he had made another half-hearted attempt at running off.
Against knowing better this time, he had made Tony fly through the entire town – again. It was not hard to guess that the mortal was probably more than a little bit pissed at him.
With a low clinking noise, the Iron Man's metal faceplate revealed his face.
"Seriously, I'll get you a collar and a leash."
A few steps closer and suddenly, Loki felt how the life flowed back into his previously calm and rather tired body. He came to his feet with fast motions and withdrew in the next moment, whole
body language defiant, eyes glaring at Tony in a mixture of repulsion and pleading. Was Tony planning to drag him back into the cellar? Would he be strong enough with the suit? Would he have to fight Tony?

Fortunately, the inventor stopped mid-movement and raised his hands in a calming gesture when he noticed the gods obvious distress. When Loki did not say anything to him, Tony took his hands down, still unable to rid his tone of every hint of annoyance.

"If you actually think I take your half-assed flight attempt serious, then I've to disappoint you. Don't make me drag you back. I will, if necessary."

If Loki had expected that his inner conflict might cease through the human's appearance and the obvious choice he had to make, the knowledge that it would have been the best if he just obeyed and followed, he had been wrong. No, the voice screaming in his head, urging him to run as fast as his feet would carry him, was louder than ever before. Still, there was also simple logic that demanded him to do the exact opposite.

"I can't do it. I trust you Tony, I really do, but I don't trust the machine you build. If something like last time happens again... even if I should survive it, it would break me. You cannot imagine what it is like."

Loki took another step back when the suit made a movement in his direction.

"You're asking for it."

Suddenly, Tony was over at Loki, acting faster than the god could retreat to grab him at his upper arm. Panic flooded the god's body, and at the moment of contact, magic gathered before he could even try to control it. An invisible force hurled the mortal's hand away so hard he stumbled backwards a few feet before he caught his balance again. Reflexively, Tony looked at his hand, then at Loki, disbelief in his eyes. As quickly as panic had taken over, it vanished again, leaving Loki with the cold, empty realization how far he had just gone. His expression was cool when he slowly shook his head, mouthing the word "No," without a sound.

His decision was made. Apparently, so was Tony's.

"What's your new plan then? Strolling into the war zone like this and taking on your bazillions of enemies alone? Yeah, you heard me right there: Alone. 'Cause I don't want to join 'Team Surrender', I've seen their strategies from the inside and let me tell you one thing: they suck."

"You don't know how it feels."

There was insistence in Loki's tone, like an animal trapped in a corner, bound to snap at whoever came too close. He definitely felt like one right now, had felt a lot like this through the past months, but never when it came to Tony.

"No, and I don't think I could handle it, but, hey, I'm not the one with superior physics and a mind trained like Yoda's. If you back away now, then you're even less than I thought of you back then in New York."

Loki bared his teeth at the other's remark. The inventor knew how to push his buttons, that was the
crux on that matter. It was meant to hurt and it really did.

As if he was not aware himself just how utterly pathetic he sounded, how cowardly and selfish his behavior appeared. However, it was easy for the mortal to hold great speeches - he was not the one who would have to face the worst of the consequences if something went wrong.

“This is not fair, you know? To talk me into it like you do... I'm not refusing to annoy you.”

Tony opened his mouth at that, probably about to snap a response at Loki, then suddenly closed it again and pressed his lips together, looking to the side.

"Yep, I know.", he eventually said curtly, then his gaze turned to Loki again, "Just so you know, I won't beg you."

The god laughed at this, a short, dry chuckle which died down as quick as it had emerged.

"It would not change anyth-"

"Please!"

Abruptly, Loki's wide-eyed gaze darted upwards to meet Tony's, but the inventor returned the look without blinking. His face was still hard, still determined, yet the dark brown of his eyes had softened. Loki had never heard him say this word before, but he meant it, that was obvious.

Only delayed, another smile crossed Loki's face, insecurely, before it died down as quickly as it had come. How should he react to something like this - an actual plead? Tony Stark, probably the most arrogant mortal on this entire, wretched planet, was pleading him to do something. The ice block in his chest started to melt on the surface, just the tiniest of bits. Refusing his cooperation further seemed more and more cruel to Loki, but the fear was still there, still impossible to overcome.

“Please.”

Although spoken quieter this time, the words struck the god with even more intensity, the look in the other's eyes, desperate and hopeful at the same time. Loki's throat tightened.

“I can't... I can't...”

Slowly, he shook his head and averted his gaze from Tony's face, staring down to the ground, incapable to look at him without being overwhelmed by guilt.

The whirring noise of mechanics and a movement in the corner of his vision told him that Tony had disassembled the suit, and mere seconds later, he felt the other's body moving close to him, only a few inches away. The god's body tensed for a second, unsure whether to expect tenderness or an attempt for cruelty again, but Tony's voice was still low and warm.

“Loki please. I know you are scared, and I am too, but you have to trust me. It will be okay this time, you won't get hurt. I promise you.”

Only when he was about to take another step back, more out of instinct than anything else, he felt the rough surface of the human's palms at the side of his head. Fingers ghosting through his hair, thumbs rubbing small, comforting circles over his cheeks and soon, the desire to give up, to simply melt into that caress, became almost overwhelming.
“You promise...”, Loki whispered and lifted his head.

Their eyes meet, not unlike the day before, dark brown and bright green. Loki felt himself getting lost in the other's gaze, incapable to look away, to move away. Their surrounding was slowly fading out compared to the closeness of Tony's face - the haggard features, the scrubby beard and these speaking eyes so familiar by now that, for a second, Loki forgot that there was still fear lurking within him.

It was only Tony now. Tony, the loud howling wind and the desert sand surrounding them.

Impossible to say who of them made the first move.
It was as if a spark had suddenly bounced between them in this moment of closeness and utter silence. There were no words left in his head when suddenly, Loki found himself moving forward, catching the other's lips with his own.

Chapter End Notes

I know, worst ending ever :D

Since we don't have that much time to draw by ourselves, we commissioned azeen-puppetmurder to draw an illustration for the end of this chapter, so have a look at the amazing result! <3
Their lips remained pressed together for the exact right amount of time, warm meeting cold - like something clicked and this one, small switch eventually set everything in sync. As if suddenly, something righted itself, in the same way explaining and ending the strange feeling of tension which had existed between them for weeks now.

When the kiss broke, their faces remained close and Tony could feel Loki's breath ghosting against his tingling lips. His mind was completely blank for a moment when he stared at the god, words tied together in a tight knot in the back of his throat. His hands still rested against Loki's cheek and only now he became aware of Loki's fingers as well, pressed against the small of his back in a reflexive urge to draw him closer. It was a lover's pose, the pose of two people in desperate need of touch and genuine reassurance that they were not alone.

The wind was howling around them, making Loki's hair fly in the harsh breeze.

Out of nowhere, the spell was broken and Tony frowned, mouth twitching into a quizzical smile upon the strangeness of the situation. It was not wrong, it was not ill-timed, it did not feel odd - the only thing he felt in this second was surprise about the fact that he was not the least bit surprised about how much he had needed this.

Just when there were words threatening to leave his mouth which would do nothing more than twist his thoughts into something he did not mean, he pulled Loki closer again to bring their lips together in another kiss. Thankfully, Loki returned the movement, fingers fisting his shirt as the kiss intensified.

From being cold, getting exasperated with the other and feeling somewhat annoyed, his thoughts and emotions slowly became pleasantly one-way. Warmth spread in his body and the sensation of another person's lips against his brought back all of the memories of how gorgeous kissing was, how he loved, how he needed to have somebody to touch and hold. He had not kissed another person since Pepper's death and only now he realized he had been starving.

When their lips parted this time, both of them were slightly out of breath. Loki looked like he was glowing, his eyes so intense and bright that one could barely look at them. He looked more alive than he had the last five days and Tony could barely bring himself to take away his hands and step backwards. With a silly little grin, Tony shook his head, then muttered a disbelieving "Fuck...".

Loki only gave a small and amused chuckle as a response to his vulgarity, a chuckle that was half-swallowed when he leaned himself forward to rest his head against the Tony's shoulder in a comfort-seeking gesture. He allowed the gesture and, almost on instant, his hands started to stroke through Loki's hair and down his back. It was a simple, yet seemingly effective action, because slowly, he could feel how the god's body melted in the touch, how his stiff posture eased and his breathing slowed down.

Maybe Loki just needed this sort of comfort and trust to finally loose this numbing fear again...

A few moments of peace, then Tony lifted the god's head. Their eyes met, before they were kissing
again, as if they had waited all these months just for this single moment. Long-missed, comforting warmth spread in his body and he pulled Loki closer, feeling the god's heart beating rapidly, a fast and strong rhythm.

Almost desperate, Loki responded to the touch, still trying to get even closer and press their bodies together until there was not an inch left between them. The longer their kiss, the more Tony's thoughts became frantic, while his movements became more and more demanding for contact and warmth. It was so easy to forget everything else around when there was another mouth pressed on your own, lips soft and warm, teeth and tongue and...

It was a noise in the distance, a small bang – probably induced by a collapsing building or the just the strong wind – that made the two of them remember that they were not in the security of their cellar, but out on the street, at the edge of a desolated city, for everyone to see.

As if by command, they separated. Much too fast for their both's taste, obviously, but they had both been unsettled by the noise. Although still caught in the haze of their kiss, Tony felt his survival instinct kicking in, accompanied by a nervous tingle. Still, a wary look around revealed nothing. Eventually, Loki broke the silence – only now, Tony realized he had been holding his breath – to speak.

“We should return. It's not safe up here... and there is something to be done.”

As soon as he had processed the meaning behind the god's words, the inventor's spooked expression changed to a smile. He knew what Loki meant to say: he would allow himself to be connected to the machine one more time.

Lead by his silent command, the suit reassembled around Tony's body. In no hurry, but still aware of their precarious situation, they both started walking, quickly disappearing in one of the smaller streets to avoid being spotted all too easily.

The atmosphere on their way back was, well, ... difficult to describe. The echo of the tenderness they had shared just a moment ago was still present and deep down in his chest, Tony dared to feel something akin to joy that finally, the feelings for each other had been revealed.

Without really noticing it, Tony had developed an affection for Loki that went far beyond normal camaraderie and friendship – although he still did not know what exactly had just happened. Yet, despite all that emotions buzzing in the air between them, both avoided touching each other. Whether it was out of nervousness and concern regarding the noise from before, or the sheer confusion and insecurity about the situation – Tony had no clue.

Just one time, their eyes met for a split-second, but they both looked away as if nothing had happened.

When they reached the cellar, it almost looked like Loki fled into their hiding place, hurrying through the door like a chased mouse. However, as soon as Tony had followed, he nearly ran into him (it did not help at all that his thoughts were everywhere else but concerned with such trifles as setting one foot in front of the other).

The god had stopped in his movements, barely a few feet away from the entrance and stared at the machinery which occupied most of the room as if it was a long-feared foe.

His reawakened distress was obvious, but Tony felt entitled to do something against it now.
Placing his hand at the small of Loki's back, he gently – but determinedly – shoved him towards the machine.

After a few seconds of standing completely stiff, the trickster eventually relented and started moving on his own accord to position himself at the right place.

Relying on the trust he had seen in the other's eyes when they had looked at each other outside, Tony had decided it was okay to leave him in the other room. After the suit had dismantled, he disappeared to return with the Tesseract which was placed within the designated construction.

The cube was already humming with eager anticipation, as if she was sensing the changed vibes.

Since their kiss, everything else felt ridiculously easy to achieve. It was as if a sudden flow of energy had rushed into him, making time go by un-naturally fast while he was preparing everything for their second attempt. It were only a few handholds and the machines were stirring to life, lighting up the Tesseract even further and it took what felt like barely seconds to adjust the settings for everything to work out right this time.
What had been a work of days and nights, now was ready within not more than 10 minutes at maximum. Where there's a will, there's a way.

Nevertheless, it was a strange feeling to switch from this moment out there, from tingling sensations and meaningful looks, back to heightened concentration and the very plausible risk of a quick, painful death. An impressive attainment in dissociation at any rate, but Tony was prepared to go for it.

If they would not do it now, Loki might change his mind again.
Also, the chances to be found were becoming higher and higher with any passing second and they needed to be ready. There was so much more to know, so much more to explore, to touch and hold and kiss, but the genius told himself that there would be a time and a place to find out what that kiss (those kisses - plural form) had been about. He was sure of that. He had to be sure of that.
Much more was at stake when you knew the person whose life you were risking was not merely the only option of a future you had, but probably - if chance was on his side this time - a future which was worth living in.

A look at Loki's profile told him that his determination was much less evolved than his own.

Gaze stuck on Loki's nervous features, the inventor slowed down his movements and approached the other, grabbing the end of the thick cable along the way. Weighing it in his hand and observing the port on its end, he stopped a few inches away from the god.
A quick side glance from the other, than Loki took his right hand to lift the black strands of hair from his neck to give Tony a better access. The action was meant to indicate consent, eagerness perhaps, yet, after all they talked about, after every reassurance the engineer had given him, he was still slightly shaking.
Tony sighed to himself, but went on, his hand slowly running up Loki's whole spine before he reached his neck and calmly picked away a few last hairs there. Then, with a quiet harmless click, the wire connected.

"Wow, look, still alive, didn't I tell you."

Tony cracked a grin, causing the god to huff with the sort of annoyance you got when you were mere seconds from jumping into an unknown black abyss.

"One more word - I'm warning you."
Almost automatically, Tony's hand sneaked around Loki's waist, distracting his attention from being mad to being concentrated on his face again. How easy his fingers now found his way, just like they belonged where they were.

"Loki. Look at me."

The trickster turned his head, pupils blown by apprehension, yet his features apparently relaxed. Merely a facade, of course. The way he carried himself, the simple refusal to back out again this time, got so much more appeal when you had seen what was actually behind these bright green eyes. His lips still had a slightly purplish shade from their kissing and Tony's gaze momentarily dropped from the eyes to the lips and back up again. He cleared his throat once, but then remained silent. For a second, he had actually forgot what he had wanted to say.

Possibly something encouraging, something worth being written down in next centuries' history books, something deeply touching perhaps. Yet, all his attention could focus on in this moment was that Loki was merely inches away from him, not even an arm's length, breathing and somehow pulsing with energy even before he had actually been exposed to the cube's power again.

"We should really do this now.", Tony muttered, more a question than a statement, all in all less than underwhelming.

"I... suppose you are right."

The way Loki paused between the words seemed to slow time down again, back from high-speed and then all the way down to slow-motion. The god's eyebrow arched in skepticism before his whole face suddenly changed entirely when he sensed the reason of Tony's hesitation and his rapidly quickening pulse.

It was hard to be a scientific genius when you were also a physical being hungry for life and satisfaction and it was close to an impossibility to perform a possibly deadly experiment with the strongest power source known to mankind when all you wanted at this moment was already in your hands and there was nothing more to do than to simply pull closer.

It was not only the sizzling noise of electricity coming from the machines that caused an unbearable tension in the air.

Yes, there was a time and a place to find out what that kiss had been about, but there was also time and place to explore to what a sole kiss could lead to. The power of decision lying in his hands for the time being, Tony decided that the place was right here and the time right now.

Their lips crashed together again like they had been waiting for it the entire time. Loki was as greedy as he was, almost pushing Tony away from the tables and the machine towards the wall in his eagerness. The inventor barely had the time to pull the connection out of his neck before the wire was stretched to full extent, a second later his back hit the concrete wall.

It was like a fuse had blown, a delicate mixture of hormones and fear, of sweet friction and the desperate desire to feel alive so that you might as well die later, in peace. Bodies pressed together tightly, Tony had both his hands entangled in the mess that was Loki's hair, kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

In fact, the thought was not that far-fetched.
During the first moments, Loki's actions were nothing but affective, the instinctive longing of an animal that had been left hungry for far too long.

He had Tony shoved against the wall within seconds, hands clawed into his side with almost too much strength. Their kiss was of an intensity that left both of them breathless - nevertheless they did not let go, as if the other would vanish the moment they would separate.

Very soon, Loki found himself overwhelmed by sensations that flooded his mind like a waterfall – as if his world had been nothing but gray until know and was now invaded by the most brilliant pulsing colors.

The way Tony's hands held his head in a firm grip, until one of them let go and reached down to his hips to press them closer; the overwhelming smell of the human, the slightest taste of the other's blood on his tongue and the brush of body against body...

With a rough movement, Tony pushed them away from the wall, switching their positions with as much coordination as could be mustered in this particular moment, until it was Loki who was pressed against the concrete.

Their lips separated for a moment, and they both just stared at each other, faces flushed, pupils blown wide, lips reddened – in Tony's case even slightly bloodied – before they kissed again, this time even more desperate, almost aggressive.

There was no way of stopping this now. Every pent up emotion - deep affection for each other, the fear of being left alone, but also the still reminiscent anger towards the other - was breaking free now, discharging in greedy touches and sloppy kisses.

With a determined yank, Tony pulled at Loki's hair, forcing the god to expose his throat to him. He allowed it, almost relaxed into the firm touch on his head. When he felt the other's lips ghosting down the smooth skin of his neck, he closed his eyes, enjoying the shiver caused by the sensation of a hot tongue drawing a trace down, over his adam's apple to his collarbone.

Then, the brush of teeth, out of nowhere, and a short tinge of pain.

Loki gasped quietly when the warm lips returned to suck at his skin and trail kisses over his neck, up to his jawline, before his head was guided back down to crush their lips together once again.

The cold was long gone from his body, replaced by the sweet heat of desire. It was unlike the kind of heat he had felt when the fever had been eating at his intestines or the scorching fire of cosmic energy.

No, the fire that Tony lit up inside of him was intense and extended beyond the physical forms. With every kiss, the mortal was melting away all last traces of fear or doubt that had been grounded in his mind.

Coordinated courses of actions became more and more difficult, because there was nothing he could concentrate on: he wanted everything at once and he wanted it immediately.

Tony's hands were roaming over Loki's body in an almost frantic attempt to touch every part of it, down along his sides and under the shirt, then up his stomach and his back. Rough fingers running over the sensitive skin of Loki's abdomen, the small of his back and up his spine, caressing and scratching and pulling closer in the same way.

Yet, it was not enough, or rather, still too much: too much clothes between them, too much of them separating them from each other and preventing that skin finally met skin.

They barely managed to hold back for two entirely too long seconds so that Tony could rid him of his hoodie, pulling it over his head less than gently. Loki forgave him, waiting not longer than a split-second after he could breath again to attack Tony's mouth again like nothing had ever happened.
He felt his head become light, be it from the oxygen deprivation or all the blood rushing downward in such a short amount of time, but there was no way to stop.
The feeling seemed mutual: Tony did not even stop a second to take a brief look at the body in front of him in the dim cellar light - all that the human did was touch and taste and smell: pressing his nose in the Loki's hair when he sucked at the soft skin behind his earlobe in a way that left the god shivering from desire, the other's hands following the lines of lean muscle and taut skin, as if trying to perceive the other person through every sense he had.

Loki pulled him closer by the fabric of his hoodie, and in response Tony ground their groins together in a harsh movement of his hips, a dark grunt pressed out between his lips.

Loki's entire body went stiff for a few seconds, mouth agape. The sweet tingle of arousal in his groin after such a long time of neglect was overwhelming and soon later, he melted back against the other man, movements erratic and needy.

Every bit of restraint that had been there was washed away, making space for sheer need.

There was only one direction where this could go, only one thing that could satisfy him right now.

With the one hand that was still holding the other's hoodie, he shoved Tony away from himself and away from the wall, guiding him roughly into the other room. Encircling pieces of machinery, here and there bumping into parts of it, they made their way, until Loki eventually threw the human onto the mattress.

For a short moment, Tony looked a little spooked by the rough handling, but it was forgotten as soon as Loki crawled on top of him to make up with a long, savoring kiss.

Without the noise of the machines, their breathing now sounded louder, closer somehow, as it became more heavy when their hands explored each other's bodies.

Their small bedroom was darker than the workshop-area, merely illuminated enough to make out shapes and movements. The darkness gave the illusion not only of privacy, but of security, reducing the mess that was the world to this confined space between them.

He clawed his fingers into the dark blue fabric of the other's pullover, while their lips fought an unfair battle, until Loki eventually had enough. Almost greedily, he shoved the piece of clothing upwards, revealing the taut muscles of the other's abdomen.

Immediately, the god's hands claimed every inch of skin as his own, running along the sides and up to the chest, then tentatively following the thin line of dark hairs trailing down from the navel which disappeared somewhere under the jeans.

Taking a firm hold around the other's waist, Loki dipped down to kiss Tony, rough and sloppy, then bit down on the other's lip. The only thing making him let go was when eventually, a small, pained noise escaped the other's mouth.

When he licked his lips, they had the salty taste of blood.

With a small grin, he sat up again to look down on Tony. Flushed face, a small trickle of blood on his mouth, warm skin exposed to his hands, dark eyes staring up at him with equal desire. He had never thought that he would once look down onto the mortal - a being which he had not even dreamed of allowing him to touch like this - but the most unexpected things sometimes were the best you got in life.

With a few quick movements and a little bit of rough pulling, the other's hoodie was entirely gone and the human's chest exposed to him.

Loki did not hesitate a second to regard the body beneath him, but dug his hands anew into the other's side to keep him in place and started kissing and biting the delicious skin laid out in front of
him.
Down from the collarbone, his frantic attacks stopped for a short moment at the scarred edges of skin around the reactor. He took in a deep breath of the other's intoxicating scent – a strangely alluring mixture of blood, metal, dust and sweat – and closed his eyes, then placed a long kiss on the spot where metal met skin.

When Loki opened his eyes again and looked up at Tony, he saw the other staring at him with heavy-lidded eyes, entirely absorbed by what the god was doing. He returned the stare with a small grin, placed another, long kiss on the arc-reactor itself and worked his way further down with small kisses and bites, changing between painful and tender.

When he reached the waistband, he briefly considered to go even further. Simply the thought of taking Tony into his mouth - the noises he would make, the salty taste on his tongue – made his groin twitch with anticipation, but he knew that neither he nor Tony had the patience for it. So, he moved back upwards again, pressing down on the mortal beneath him, making him buck his hips in desperate need for friction. Still caught behind a layer of clothes, their groins rubbed against each other, an entirely unsatisfying way to release at least a little bit of tension.

Loki gasped, indulging in the delicious contact and a breathless “Fuck!” escaped Tony's lips, yet otherwise he stayed completely quiet.

There was nothing to talk about, there was only one thing they both needed.

Tony's hands, previously only dead weight, found their way effortlessly, sliding along the sides of Loki's torso, until they reached their destination. Giving his ass a firm grip through the fabric of his jeans, they caused his breath to hitch just the slightest, before they moved on, running up and down the sides of his thighs.

Somehow, their mouth's met again, a sloppy fight of tongues and teeth and lips. Loki was kissing in such a feral and greedy manner that he would not find it surprising if Tony interpreted it as an intention to hurt. Yet, he would not stop to do so, unless the mortal would demand him to – but right now, it seemed as if he was willing to give everything Loki wanted.

Between all the panting, the biting and nibbling, Loki's hand slowly traveled down Tony's stomach, grazing the line of hair beneath his belly-bottom and then closing around the visible bulge in his jeans.

The way the mortal's breath hitched, how the muscles in his body became taut and his hips moved up in unmasked anticipation was too delicious to drag this out any longer.

A smirk spread over Loki's features, invisible to Tony, since the trickster's head rested against the side of the other's face, scraping his teeth along the stubbly skin. His long fingers found the button of the other man's pants and opened it with a nimble movement, shoving his hand under the waistband in the next.

The skin beneath the fabric was even hotter than on what was exposed to the air, creating an intense contrast to the god's only slowly warming hands.

A small, cracked moan made its way to Loki's ear when his fingers closed around Tony's hard member and freed it from the restraining clothing. He stroked it one time, then another, felt how the precum from the tip was spread over the entire length and made it slick to his grip. It did not need much more than that, Tony was already barely able to hold himself back from bucking his hips, his low moans sweet music in Loki's ears.

They both had endured long periods of drought and he knew that it would soon become impossible for the mortal to drag this out any longer. Still, it was mesmerizing to feel and see what power he
held over the other, to feel the heat in his pulsing length.

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In his life, he had had his fair share of meaningless sex - this was something else. Reduced to nothing but primeval instincts, this was new and exciting, intoxicating like the first burning sip of a fine bottle of Whiskey, the same bitter-sweet taste in your mouth when you swallowed. Whatever this explosive mixture was - it would not need much more for him to come just like that.

Fuck, it had been months - over half a year if you liked to put it the cruel way - and he felt like he was about to explode. The fact that Loki's hand felt like it was doing wonders down there did not make it any better, pumping his throbbing erection slowly, but with just the right amount of pressure. Tony allowed himself one, two more intakes of breath, biting down his bottom lip when he felt Loki's tongue flick over the line of his neck.

When the demanding heat became almost too intense, his hand slid down as well and he got hold of Loki's wrist to keep him from going on. Their gazes met for just a second, something like smug surprise showing in the other's eyes, before they suddenly widened when the genius used his weight to roll them around again. Before Tony managed to pin Loki's wrists down to the mattress, there was just a great entanglement of limbs and hair, his jeans now only at half mast with his cock exposed to the chilly cellar air, and one of the sleeping backs - he had no idea on whose mattress they had landed at all - crumpled somewhere on their side.

He bent down for another kiss, while his hands started fumbling with the button and fly of Loki's jeans. Usually the master of multi-tasking, he now had to interrupt their kiss several times, fighting to yank down the annoying piece of cloth completely when there was Loki at the same time, greedily pulling him down to his lips every time he dared to take a breath without him.

Loki chuckled, short and quietly, at Tony's almost ravenous attempts to remove his pants, but then mercifully wiggled himself out of the clothing. He wore no boxers, the inventor noticed with a shudder, so his cock was exposed instantly, until a second later, skin met skin and Tony ground down onto him.

The sound half-swallowed by Tony's lips that claimed the god's a moment later, the other moaned and his hips jerked uncontrollably and wanton from the sudden contact.

Now it was Tony's part to attack every inch of Loki's skin, all of it exposed to him with no exception. Hot lips kissing their way along the side of his neck, his ear and jawline, while his hands were ghosting over the smooth skin of the god's chest. He wanted to memorize every detail, every unevenness of the firm musculature, this particular smell and taste: sweat and dirt, yes, but also something vaguely reminding of pine and ice, of fresh cold and distant sweetness.

He would burn it in his memory so that he would never forget.

Above him, Loki closed his eyes and let his head fall to the side, giving in willingly to everything Tony did to him. His mouth was open, but his moans barely audible, even though his pale chest was heavily sinking and rising.

Only one time his breath hitched when Tony moved his hips in a different angle, creating more friction for both of them and sending a rush of pleasure through his body.

The pressure building in his lower abdomen was becoming more and more as the movement of their bodies against each other became erratic. Brushing their cocks together every time he moved, his lust only increased, but was never satisfied.
He did not want to wait any longer, he wanted to fuck the god, to bury himself deeply into Loki.

For a few seconds, he interrupted his caresses, finally getting rid of his jeans as well. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Loki’s gaze dropping to his erection, flushed red and leaking with precum.

A smile appeared in the corner's of his mouth, a small, hungry grin, and the god's tongue flicked over his lips in anticipation.

The tension in the air was almost sensible as those two heated bodies remained unmoved for the ticking of a few long seconds.

Tony's gaze flickered to Loki's face again, returning his small smile with a confident grin, before he puffed a strand of hair away which had fallen on his forehead. There was no need to ask for consent or to negotiate anything - but he needed to keep reassuring that Loki was still there and still with him.

As if they were there for nothing but his pleasure to caress them, he let his hands roam over the sensitive skin of Loki's thighs, running up to the hollows of his knees before he leaned his weight against them. All too willingly, Loki gave in, spreading his legs wide and invitingly.

Easily, Tony sank against the welcoming warmth, his cock brushing over Loki's entrance when the god's knees were bent so far that they were almost touching the mattress.

The god's breath stopped for a moment, then he exhaled again, locking eyes with Tony. There was nothing he tried to hide, quite the opposite.

Legs spread wide, his most sensitive spot exposed just for him - the gesture could almost be considered provocative if they had not both known that playing hard-to-get would simply be ridiculous right now.

Still keeping eye-contact, Tony took his hand up to his mouth and parted his lips, slowly pushing one finger inside.

He saw the shiver going through Loki's body when he sucked on it, slicking it nice and good, maybe just a tiny bit longer than necessary, before he eventually took it out again. A faint grin appeared on his lips when he let his finger disappear between the god's legs.

Smearing saliva around the sensitive flesh of Loki's entrance, Tony stimulated the spot just a bit, before he increased his pressure slightly. Despite years of abstinence, his finger entered the other easily, smoothly sliding inside the him up until the knuckle.

It felt like Loki was sucking him in, so ready for it that one finger was nothing but a cruel tease. He felt the god pushing against him, eagerly waiting for more, waiting to be filled entirely.

Tony inhaled deeply, breath slightly shaking from the sheer ideas that gave him, then added a second finger.

Again, Loki’s body met his movement, his hips rolling sensually, urging himself against his fingers, so Tony pulled them out again, which earned him a disappointed purring noise. With a slow, steady movement, he let them sink inside again, stretching the tight hole while his only thought was how it would feel to slam his cock in there. Only two fingers and the trickster was already leaking precum on his own stomach – it had been a fucking long time.

Finally, he managed to tear his gaze from the hypnotizing spectacle to meet the trickster's eyes again.

There was want written in great letters all over Loki's face - unconcealed lust in darkened, hazy eyes, pupils blown wide and a droplet of sweat running down his temple. In his penetrating gaze there was just one demand, one plead, urging the inventor to move - and so he did.
His fingers left, leaving the god once again empty and open with legs spread wide. With a few, firm strokes, Tony slicked his erection with some spit, then he was onto Loki again. Pressing his legs apart, he positioned himself, then entered him in one, determined thrust.

A hoarse cry escaped the god's mouth when Tony buried himself deep inside of him, drowning his own guttural groan. Back arching up in the desperate attempt both to escape the stinging pain and increase the burning sensation, Loki pressed himself against him, nails vainly clawing into the mattress.

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At the moment of entering, Loki's entire back arched of the mattress and his legs went stiff around the mortal's hips, pushing him deeper inside.
Heart beating wildly and breath going irregular, a rush of desire devoured Loki's mind in the first moments, but also the slight stinging of pain of being entered mostly unprepared.
His hands found their way up to the Tony's back where he let his nails dig into skin and muscles, attempting to release a bit of the tension in his body and to relax around the other man.

Eventually, the first tautness and pain faded and Tony started to move. The first thrusts were slow, tentative, as if he had to get used to the feeling first, after such a long time.
Loki's eyes remained closed, concentrating completely on the sensations of his body and the sharp breaths coming from Tony's mouth.
With each movement, the previous reluctance decreased and he started to melt against the body on top of him. His hips began moving on their own to meet the other man's thrusts perfectly, soft moans escaping him every time he felt the pulsing length entering him completely, before pulling back again.

It felt so good to have another body so close, to feel the warmth on his skin but also deep inside, accompanied by this sweet, alluring tingle that made his head swim and cleared it of all articulated thoughts.

Tony was close to him, as close as he could get, bent down above him. With his arms slightly under Loki's body, he was holding him in place, keeping him close, his chest tightly pressed to Loki's and his face burrowed in the crook of his neck.
He felt the mortal's hot breath against his skin, felt his entire body against his own with every movement he made.

Another thrust, this time sharper, harder, and Loki's body tensed again. A louder, unrestrained moan escaped him and his nails dug into Tony's skin, drawing blood.
It had been so long since somebody had dared to touch Loki in that manner, to claim him and let himself equally be claimed and marked.
A part of him wished that this was going to last: that they could stay here, in this small room. Isolated from the rest of the world with no one but Tony, his touch, the noise of his moans against Loki's neck, his smell and warmth.

Loki could feel his own cock pressing against Tony, the hot, wet flesh rubbing against the other's abdomen every time he pushed back into him. His body was glowing from pleasure, radiating such a heat that it caused a thin layer of sweat to built in the small remaining space between their bodies.

Slowly, the speed of their rhythm increased. They were rutting against each other like animals, the noise of skin smacking against skin, harsh breathing, suppressed moans and small yells was filling the whole room.
Sometimes, even those were silenced when their lips met again for uncoordinated, messy kisses, and sometimes, Loki moved his head to the side, so that Tony could plant smaller kisses at the side
of his face and lick along the shell of his ear.

Never he had thought it to be Tony who would be able to set him on fire like this, but here he was, taking everything he offered and still wanting more.

They kept their eyes closed and their lips together, breathing each other's stuttering breath while Tony slammed into him with unfaultering power, sometimes varying in rhythm and speed, as if enjoying listening to the changes of melody in Loki's moans.

“Tony.”

The word was mumbled under his breath into the other's ear when their lips had parted again, barely audible in the noises they were making; the louder moans, rustling of clothes and slapping of skin. However, Tony's pace slowed down for a few seconds, as if he wanted to make sure that he had not misheard.

“Tony...”

His whisper was even quieter than before, but this time, Tony's movements ceased completely – an impressive act of self-control with the pressure inside already built up so far. Yet, when he kissed Loki again, it was neither greedy nor hurried, but long, savoring.

He could feel the human's pulse under his hands and where their chests were pressed together tightly, incredibly fast, much faster than his own, more stable heartbeat.

Still caught in the kiss, Loki moved his hips again, urging the mortal to move on. He was barely able to endure this any longer, the sweet tingling in his body was becoming too intense.

Of course, Tony gave in to the demand and began to move again, thrusting forward, rougher and with more energy.

Loki wanted to say something, but his lips were unable to form words. A moan escaped his mouth, shaken by the heavy movements of the other's body, and then followed by another, much louder one.

He could almost feel every vein under his skin, as heat burst through his body with every time Tony's cock slammed into him, pleasure threatening to overwhelm him.

Damn, he was close! So close - just a few more seconds...

He came with a loud and broken-off scream, his nails drawing bloody lines into Tony's back when all of his muscles went stiff for the short, wonderful moment when orgasm wiped out his mind.

At the edge of his perception, he heard the other man's sharp intake of breath, and barely seconds later, he felt how Tony released himself, too, driven by the tightening muscles around his cock, yet the only thing that escaped his lips was a strangled groan.

The erratic movements ceased completely when he came hard inside of Loki, his hands clawed in the his body as if he could never lose the grip again.

Only slowly, the all drowning warmth from inside receded, making way for other sensations formerly wiped out: the drying blood at the tip of his fingers, his sweaty hairs sticking to his forehead, warm cum dripping from his chest and abdomen where he had sullied them both.

They were a complete mess: sticky and dirty, entangled in crumpled clothes on a filthy old mattress, both trying to regain breath and something like consciousness - it felt absolutely wonderful.

When their gazes met, Tony looked as blown away as Loki felt.
They shared the moment a little longer, this precious period of ambiguity, in which you were allowed to savor the dazzling feeling from before and were still freed from returning to reality. Everything was still warm and fluid, the other body was still more than desirable and one was far from thinking about what lurked beyond the corners of the bed.

Finally, Tony moved away a bit, leaving his body with a slick popping noise. Loki felt cum thickly dripping from his entrance. Tony sat back, halted for a second and Loki watched how he looked down on his form, feasting his eyes on his long, slender legs still casually spread wide, the way his flushed cock was only slowly softening again.

Loki responded to the still lusting gaze, and spread his legs a little bit more, teasingly.

One smooth movement and Tony was on top of him again, shoving their bodies together to capture his lips in a last kiss, as if it was the only thing he wanted to feel at the moment.

Loki responded to the kiss, warm and soft lips moving against his own, and one of his hands went up to stroke through the mortal's damp hair.

Their lips parted again, but Loki kept his eyes closed. Tony moved his head slightly, then he felt how the other press a kiss to his forehead. It was a simple gesture, less heated than everything they had done before, but still it was much more intimate. It made Loki feel like the most important person in the entire universe.

Maybe, he was to Tony right now.

When the body of the other moved away again, Loki opened his eyes and rolled to his side. At another time, the wet stickiness on his stomach and between his legs might have annoyed him, but he did not care right now.

All of his attention was focused on the mortal, who was fumbling in the darkness to rearrange the blankets and then disappeared under one of them. Their eyes met again, and, as if on a silent command, Tony lifted the blanket invitingly.

Loki did not hesitate. One single movement and then he shifted closer to crawl into the offered space.

One of his hands went around the other's waist almost on his own accord and after a little bit of shuffling, he had snuggled up closely, his head in the crook of the mortal's neck.

He stayed awake for a few moments more, listening to Tony's slowing heartbeat and breathing in his scent.

Eventually, he too succumbed to sleep.

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“Is everything fine over there?”

“Yes, I assume so.”

Several hours had passed, hours which could easily pass as the best of this whole damned journey, even though they had been filled with nothing more than napping and lazy lolling around, feeling each other's body.

Maybe it was because they had been filled with just that...

Now, both of them were standing at the same spot where they had left of before, both of course decently clothed. Loki was positioned in the middle of the room, the end of the plugged-in cable disappearing somewhere beneath his hair.
From what Tony could spot from where he was hiding behind the old computer screen, he was
doing his best in trying to look at ease. He was not.

The genius still sensed a certain insecurity, even fear in the other's behavior, but compared to
where they had been a few hours before, this was nothing. They had not spoken about it, of course not, but why should they?
Despite the fact that Loki was still facing a dangerous procedure that could easily kill him, Tony
felt as good as he had not felt since ages. The feeling of warmth somewhere in his chest refused to
disappear, even after they had heaved themselves out of bed an hour ago, even now that he was
preparing the last settings for their next trial.

Of course, the thrill of fear could not be ignored, but both Loki and he had come to the conclusion
that it was either now - or never.

When he looked up from making the last adjustments to the Tesseract's energy extractor, he
noticed Loki's stare. He shot the god a smile, short but reassuring, then returned to type in the last
lines of code that were necessary to activate the machine.

His finger hovered a few seconds over the Enter-key, then he finally pressed it. Quickly, he rose
from his chair to have a close look on Loki and to intervene – if necessary.

The metal cladding vibrated and a bone-deep hum filled the room when the machinery started to
work. In this moment, he wished that Loki would look at him, but the god was facing away from him,
probably unable to bring himself to look at the construction behind him.

Arms crossed in front of his chest and lips pressed together tightly, Tony's eyes followed the
energy's way, how it crawled up the cable like a hungry, living thing. Then, his nervous gaze
switched to Loki's back and over to the blue light that filled the wall in front of him, the god's
shadow flickering across it like a grotesque beast.

The omnipresent energy raised the hair on his neck and arms and he could almost taste the
Tesseract's power as the whole place filled up with it, the only noise the static crackle of lightning
bolts that tried to escape their cage.

It was visible for the plain eye when it finally reached the junction, invading Loki's body like just
another conductor.

Only in this moment, the notion that this, whatever the outcome might be, was the turning point.
Nothing would be the same like before. Whatever happened between them a few hours ago,
whatever happened between them ever – if Tony had bad luck, nothing of it would mean anything
any more.

The engineer held his breath, knuckles turning white from clawing his fingers in the fabric of his
pullover.

There was no scream this time, no stench of scorched flesh and hair - just light, becoming brighter
and brighter with every second. It seemed to seep under Loki’s skin, to fill him up from inside, shining through the tissue of his
body from every single cell.

With the electricity becoming louder and louder, another sound seemed to mix under the cracking
noises. It was hard to discriminate against the all-drowning noise, yet it sounded like a whisper
from afar, resonating in the small room like from the ceilings of a great cathedral.
Yet, it was not speaking to him.

The god was not moving, impossible to say whether he was holding himself upright or was held by the cube's incredible power. With his face turned away from Tony, he could not even guess what he had to feel at the moment.

Everything Tony felt was fear – the fear of the inventor who had to witness his creation doing its unpredictable work.

He kept looking until the light became blinding and the noise seemed to shred his eardrums.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was dark and the whisper was fainting in the distance. Behind him, the Tesseract's glow was reduced to nothing more than a faint glimmer. Tony's pupils had to adjust to the sudden change at first, unable to distinguish anything but vague forms.

However, he could see Loki.

The god was still where he had been before, his tall figure standing in contrast to the darker surroundings – he was glowing.

He was so full of energy, charged with the power of a whole universe that he was fucking glowing. It was only faint and, the longer he looked, the effect was already dying down again, but it was absolutely mind-blowing.

They had made it.

Loki was still alive - the machine had worked.

In front of him, the other slowly rose his hands to look at the inside of his palms. That was the moment Tony remembered that he had to breath again.

Naturally, the first word blurtling out of his mouth still sounded a little shaky.

“Loki?”

There still was a hint of fear within him, though. He distrusted this cube, distrusted her power like he had learned to distrust promises of great glory.

Nevertheless, there was probably nothing which would hold him back from checking on Loki now, to see whether he was alright.

“Did it work? How do you feel?”

Approaching the other with quick steps, something made him stop before he came up with the idea of touching him. There was a radiance holding him back, a power not unlike the prickling feeling of unease you should sense when you were about to touch a high-voltage power line.

Hand stopped mid-movement, Tony frowned and opened his mouth to utter his concern, but then, Loki turned around.

Whatever it was that he had been about to say, it was gone.

There was a faint blueish glow under Loki's skin, in his veins, but it were his eyes that caught Tony's attention. Where there had been bright green before, there was now an otherworldly, intense blue, cosmic fire raging behind these bright orbs.

“Better than ever before.”

A feral grin spread over the god's lips and the entire building shook when his magic boiled with
excitement.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gawd, we're sorry for the long time it took us to update D:
We hope the 5000 words of smut were worth the waiting...
Needless to say, they left as soon as possible.

Despite the - even in retrospection - quite amazing night they had spent in the cellar, feelings of regret were scarce. They both wanted to leave this depressing hole and they had waited long enough for the outlook being as positive as it was now.

The car was considerably less stuffed than on their arrival, since the complete equipment was meant to stay underground. They had no need for it any longer: the Mark Omega was built (Tony could barely wait to test this baby) and Loki was... well, that was kind of a problem: he had not really come up with a definition of what Loki was now.

Actually, when he god had stared at him with this bright, endlessly deep glare the night before, Tony had thought it to be over for a second.

Whether he had been under-estimating Loki's inherent power or whether he had just become an overall pessimistic type: at Loki's grin, he had been 99 percent sure that he had lost him to the cube's will.

The origin of the words he had spoken, who had been actually grinning at him like mad - he had not been able to tell apart where Loki ended and something... bigger began. Not only bigger, but inclined to become even greater still.

Yet, it had not happened.

Neither had Loki gone on a destructive rampage nor had he torn Tony apart with sheer hands, making his way back to the West Coast to take over what was left of the USA. Instead, he had started to rave:

how it felt, how the magnificent wisdom of the Tesseract was everywhere within his body, how the tiniest whim made the magic spark out of him like he was overflowing. The inventor had taken his word for it, it had not been necessary for the other to show him by making every piece of plastic in the room melt without even batting an eye.

The small earthquake from before had been enough to instill some good portion of respect in him.

Tony had found back to his wit on the same evening, but had still been relieved to notice that the glowing-thing did not seem to be permanent. Slowly, it had subsided over the course of the night, yet every stronger form of emotion had the power to let it flare up again.

Only half a conversation and the engineer had been sure: where he had been talking to a unpredictable God of Mischief before, he was now talking to a volcano on the verge of eruption.

It kind of messed with his feelings, but he praised himself that he only was a bit reluctant with body-contact, though. It did not seem to bother Loki that much, since his thoughts were definitely occupied by some much grander schemes than the simple affection for a mortal.

Really, 'mixed feelings' definitely were an underestimation for what Tony felt about those new development, but he rolled with it.

What else was there to do, anyway.
"What- what're you doing?"

"I'm driving."

Loki, his hand already on the car doorknob, unwillingly stopped in his movements and looked over to Tony. A certain high-handedness could not be ignored and painfully reminded him of the fact that in those last weeks, he had dealt with a Loki running on low flame. These times were evidently over, not that Tony would mind. Since those first moments of skeptical respect, he had quickly recovered, finding that playing with an incalculable volcano could turn out really interesting...

"Ah, no. You're not. You're the shiny Magical Girl, I'm the guy with the heavy machinery. I drive."

A small grin flickered in Loki's eyes, then he shook his head in amusement. Still, he did not move an inch, but only opened the door to sit down on the driver's seat. All of this was screaming 'power play' and, yes, Tony could actually feel the tingling urge to test the new limits in his fingertips, but as it looked now, he was at a disadvantage. He remained on his place for a moment, watching with a grumpy frown how Loki entered the car, then took his time to do so as well.

"I always advocated the Magical Girl empowerment movement, so, mark that as an act of mercy."

Tony slumped in the passenger's seat, checking a last time if everything they needed was safely stored on the back seat. A low chuckle came from the side, then the motor started with a loud roar, tearing through the silence around them. Yet, instead of accelerating the car, Loki suddenly had his hand was on Tony's thigh, making the inventor turn around.

"I'm truly grateful, Tony...."

The god looked sincere when he spoke, no part Tesseract, just Loki. Tony cocked an eyebrow.

"... but I drive."

With this, Loki finally accelerated, and the car made a jump forward with screeching wheels. Dust and dirt was whirled up in the air as they drove over the muddy ground onto the asphalt street again with a speed definitely not matching the numbers on the speed limit signs. Just when they had made it a few hundred feet further and Tony started to get used to the running by ruins and side roads behind his window again, a loud, sharp sound pierced the air, immediately followed by the much louder boom of an explosion.

The genius startled from his seat, head whirling around to look through the rear window, just to see that, a few blocks afar, their hideout from the last weeks had burst up in flames. Thick, black smoke filled the air and orange light illuminated his features when he turned back to Loki with a questioning face.

"You know that was not necessary."

"I know."

Even though a bit creepy, Loki's grin was contagious.

"If someone was in proximity, they will be distracted now.", Loki eventually added, after his grin had subsided.

“That's bullshit, I know you waited the entire time to do that. Who's the show-off now?”
“Still you.”

“I don't blow up things for fun!”

“You do, I know for sure.”, Loki said with another low chuckle.

“Damn, you got me.”

Their bantering continued for a few minutes, before the two of them fell silent again, Tony with a small smile on his face.

Once out of town, a certain feeling of déja vu was setting in. For quite some time, they followed the lonesome street eastwards, bypassing empty gas station and stores at each side.

Tony managed not to think about the millions of people who had lived around this area once, he just stared out of the window.

They would avenge them now. Now, they could do it. Just a few days more and they would face the destructive force responsible for all of this. Responsible for Pepper's death...

Another thought he pushed far, far away in the back of his head, unwilling to deal with the implications it caused. It had come to his mind several times lately, that their destination and their causes lost their significance for him the closer his relationship to Loki became.

When he looked over to Loki, the god looked not changed. There was no blue left, just a slight, barely visible radiance along the outlines of his features.

Tony looked ahead again before his stare became obvious. Maybe he should simply sleep...

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It did not take long, and the sun was already setting again – the days were short and it was cold outside, cold enough to keep the ground permanently frozen. The sky above was clear of any clouds and would have been a dark blue, if not for the dust hanging in the atmosphere.

The horizon was painted in the warm colors of the setting sun, the sky apparently endless on this plain land.

When Loki looked over to Tony after some hours, he found the mortal sleeping, hugging his legs tight to him, almost looking misplaced on the seat. He had a thick, woolen scarf wrapped around his neck, something they had found in a closet somewhere higher up in the house.

That scarf and the calm expression on his face made him look older and younger at the same time. A faint smile spread over Loki's features.

They had not talked about the incident in the cellar again, since Tony had left the bed upon waking, while Loki had stayed, still half-asleep and curled up in the warm blankets.

Then, the Tesseract's power had blown away all other thoughts, had freed his mind of anything else and it had taken some time for this condition to change again.

Now, with the other so close and the Tesseract's energy nothing but calmly pulsing inside of him, he wished that there would be a chance to touch Tony again, even if it meant only sleeping close to him.

The warm and oxygen deprived air from the car's heater and the deep, lulling sound of the engine only helped to let his thoughts become drowsy and drift away.

The other's face was almost mesmerizing to look at in the descending light of the day, the sinking sun illuminating it in soft orange. Involuntarily, Loki found himself staring, losing himself in this cozy little fantasy just a second too long.
From one moment to the other, the car was lifted from the ground and made a dive forward. A split-second of flight, then they crashed. Hood first, metal met soil, hurrying them both forward in a violent jolt. It all was too fast to see what happened, to blurred to think. The only thing there was was the ear-shredding sound of metal breaking and glass shattering.

In an instant, his whole mind switched into a shock-induced fighting mode. The energy inside of Loki, previously slumbering, flared up, almost burning him with its intensity. His hands lit up with a blinding blue where the magic forced its way to the surface, making the air buzz with static energy.

“What the FUCK?!”

Tony's yell shrilled in his ears as the inventor whirled towards Loki, staring at him startled and wide-eyed, splinters of glass falling out of his hair.

Loki, with his hands still risen in anticipation of an attack, needed some time to comprehend what exactly had happened.

Crushed metal, steam rising from beneath the hood, rough stone and soil where there should actually be a street – a look over his shoulder finally gave an explanation.

Apparently, he had driven their car right into a rift - broad and several feet deep, as if the earth had just cracked here, breaking open asphalt and soil through the entire street - wrecking the precious machine successfully.

Tony, although barely awake for longer than 4 seconds, surprisingly needed no additional time to understand what had happened. In one moment and without another word, the mortal had unbuckled the seat belt and scrambled out of the car to have a look at it from outside.

The god stayed glued to the seat for a few more seconds, the flaring magic only slowly subsiding. He could still not entirely grasp the concept that he had just deprived them of their best, most important tool for transportation.

Only hesitantly, with slow, reluctant movements, Loki climbed out of the car to step into the setting sunlight of this cold winter's day.

The sight from outside was not even remotely better than from inside: the car was wrecked, completely, with no chance of repair. He could be glad that due to the cushioning effect of the soft soil Tony had no worse damage than a few scratches and had not hit his head. He could have been severely injured, if not killed and it would have been Loki's fault.

Yet, Tony seemed mostly well, encircling the car, observing the whole disaster the god had just caused. Nervous and alarmed, but obviously not physically harmed. It was so surreal, so utterly ridiculous that a triviality like a car accident - not even a dramatic one - should stop them now.

He felt truly ashamed, for the moment unable to do anything else than look at the car, running a hand along the still intact parts of it. Tony's comment did not really help to ease the unpleasant feeling.

"Even without my life-long expertise, I can assure you from up here that it's totaled."

"I don't remember losing control...", Loki mumbled more to himself than to Tony, looking somewhere between thoughtful and distressed.
"I remember dreaming of amaretto liquor and then suddenly, my face was riddled with broken bits of glass."

This time, the human's snide tone could even be considered as completely justified: they were in the middle of nowhere, maybe another day from the coast. They had no means to carry their belongings, the food, the blankets and the few machine parts.

It was cold, and Tony was injured, even if not severely, and understandably angry at him.

Loki stared at the ground for a short moment, absent-mindedly biting his lips, then looked up at the mortal, opened his mouth to give a reply which might even turn out as an apology, but Tony only snapped a "Shut it.", before he abruptly turned around and hurried towards the cargo area.

Except for the fact that everything was not exactly on the place where it had been before, their stuff was intact. Which included the other's armor, neatly placed under a tarpaulin, to shield it from the elements.

Loki watched him observe the sight, before he exhaled and then removed the tarpaulin in one swift movement.

"I think I got my ride."

Loki's previously blank face turned into a frown. Being angry at him was one thing, but endangering both of them by flying off on his own? That was surely not going to happen.

"Is this your kind of punishment? Leaving me down here to walk, while you fly up ahead, visible for miles?"

The mortal made an amused snorting noise.

"Seriously, how could you miss THAT?!", Tony exclaimed, much too loud for Loki's taste, and made a wide gesture to the enormous rift that split right through the street.

"It was only a second I did not keep my eyes on the street. How could I expect that there is a part missing?"

Loki was fully aware that excuses would not have any effect, not on Tony. The mortal knew him too well by now.

But surprisingly, the other's angry stare had vanished and he looked thoughtful for a moment, his eyes focused on the rift.

"...yes, why is there even a part missing?"

Led by the same thought, their gazes followed the ditch that cut through the ground as if been torn by a giant claw, and eventually locked on a dark object at the end of it, about a hundred feet away and barely visible in the descending light of the day.

It was Tony who started walking first, suddenly driven by some kind of impulsive curiosity, following along the edges of the deepening rift towards the unknown structure. Loki followed with a little bit of distance, and even before the human had muttered a low 'Fuck', he knew what they had in front of them.

Dark metal, forged into organic structures that reminded of twisting tentacles and greedy claws, its surface scorched, the machinery within long dead, but still emitting something that made a shudder run down Loki's spine.

"At least we know that we're on the right way.", Tony eventually muttered, his hand hesitantly
outstretched to touch the frozen surface. He stopped only an inch in front of it and withdrew it again, apparently concluding that it was not the wisest idea to get in contact with the alien material.

“There must be more.”

Loki turned around to look back where the structure had come from. It was not an individual ship - he knew the different structures the Chitauri built quite well - but a small part that had been torn off a much bigger complex which probably was not that far away. Yet, the only thing he could see was the ditch that stretched over several hundred feet, from where the shard had made contact with the ground to their current position where it had come to a halt.

The wrecked car was of no importance any more - now, that they had almost stumbled upon a Chitauri ship. A Chitauri ship which, as it looked like, had been crashed, but nevertheless promised contact in a not so distant future. And they had been sleeping just a three, four hours from here, for weeks...

Suddenly wary of his surroundings, Loki rose his head to stare into the darkness that surrounded them. They could have their nest right behind that hilltop further up the street, they could have heard the crash and were now lurking somewhere in the darkness, ready to grab him...

Loki's magic spread out like tendrils, prodding and exploring everything that was within reach: the frozen soil beneath, the ship in front of them, the car - as far as he could spread it without exhausting too much of his energy. However, the only heartbeat he could feel was Tony's, fastened from adrenaline and sometimes a little bit irregular. He was the only living thing around.

Loki exhaled in relief, having not noticed that he had been holding his breath.

“There is nothing...but you will stay with me. If there is anything out there, we have to stay together. They will see you if you take off.”

Tony's eyes fixed upon the bright, shimmering line of the horizon where the sun had vanished just a few minutes ago, a grim smile appeared on his lips when he answered Loki. His breath formed a small cloud in front of his face, but from the look on his face, he had long forgotten the cold.

"That's the whole point of the plan: I want them to see me coming."

A sharp, metallic clattering behind them, then the suit broke free from its holder, assembling smoothly around the mortal's body. Loki's alerting "Tony, no!" was unheard through the closing faceplate, then the entire armor lit up with blue light, ready for battle.

"Let's go, princess."

Loki made a move forward, intending to stop the mortal from taking off by grabbing his arm, hands and arms unintentionally aflame with bright, scorching magic. He did not touch the mortal in the end, very well aware that this would undoubtedly lead to a total escalation, but it had the desired effect. The genius froze on the spot, and in the first moment, he almost looked as if he was about to fight back. Fortunately, he decided for the better, letting the faceplate open up again. His body, however, stayed tense.

Loki picked his words considerately, trying to give his voice a calming sternness.
"We'll approach them together. It would be foolish to run into battle without knowledge about their condition."

"Are you threatening me?"

The brightness of the blue flames decreased when the trickster eased in his stance, now more concerned than infuriated.

"You're like a child that never listens - there's nothing else to do to stop you from running straight into your death."

"If anything, I fly into-"

The last half of the sentence was cut off when Tony's mouth suddenly closed as something else caught his attention.

Right in between their bodies, one single snowflake slowly tumbled downwards. Barely visible and as light as a feather, it sank to the dirty ground, successfully causing them both to follow its trail with their eyes until it had landed. Then, Loki looked up to the sky behind Tony, the direction they were heading for. At the horizon, there was a gray, almost white wall of clouds, quickly emerging from the eastward ocean.

Barely a moment later, a gush of wind rushed over the land, tearing at Loki's clothes like a stormbreeze. A few feet further behind, the car's plastic tarpaulin fluttered helplessly in the wind, before it was torn off with a loud snap and whirled away.

With the wind came more snowflakes, small, white crystals that floated in and out of his view. Now, he could smell it, too. The smell of snow, but also the slightly warmer, more humid air from the ocean.

It was not a good sign.

"We won't fight today. Take what food and water is left from the backseat, he have to find a place to stay."

With these words, Loki passed Tony to return to their car, and continued to put everything edible they had left into a huge bag.

"What's the matter with you, it's just a little bit of snow."

Tony kept on complaining, but simply the fact that he had followed Loki and now too helped to store the food told that he could sense as well that there was something amiss.

"It's not just a little bit of snow. We have to find a shelter to withstand the worst."

"Can't you just magic it away?"

Loki, bent over with his hands roaming on the backseat, stopped in his movements and looked at the mortal.

“I probably could, but surely you don't want me to waste too much energy until it has come to its actual use."

“No, probably not.”, came Tony's quiet reply, and with that, they continued to collect their last
remains of canned food.

When they finally left the wrecked car only a few minutes later, the snowfall had increased distinctly and the stormy wind made it tiresome to walk. Loki did not lack the strength to walk against the harsh gusts, not even with his arms wrapped around a heavy bag full of food, but it slowed him down nevertheless. Tony, with his entire body wrapped into a smooth-surfaced, aerodynamic suit, had less problems walking, while Loki had to struggle to keep his loose and scorch-hole tattered hoodie from catching too much wind.

At some point, the nocturnal darkness had engulfed them entirely, tainting everything black, even for Loki’s superior eyes. Tony had to light up the street in front of them, yet what they saw was only the white chaos of the snowfall. After some time, walking became difficult, even for him. The storm did not subside, Loki’s clothing had frozen and become stiff, he could barely see and the snow reached up to his ankles. He had no idea if they were still walking on the highway, or if they had been lost somewhere.

“Come, we have to go this way. Jarvis found us something, some kind of building. We can wait there.”

Tony’s announcement came as a relief, and Loki followed the small specks of blue light gratefully.

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Even though the building had to be huge and it said on the display that it was only half a mile from them, they could not see anything for another half hour.

Tony did not comment on it, but the fact that there actually was a building out here - where his sensors did not measure anything else even remotely looking like forms of civilization - unsettled him. And it was not just a big, four stories house - it had to be really huge, dimensions matching more those of a skyscraper than of, let’s say, a military outpost or what one would expect out here.

Whatever it was they were heading for - it was not supposed to be here.

As if the thick snowfall and the icy temperatures were not enough already, they had to go uphill for the last minutes.

Despite the suit, Tony felt like freezing. He had not spent that much thought on the lagging - certainly he had not calculated a sudden temperature fall like that. Yet, he gritted his teeth and marched on, already happy for the fact that he had been building the armor well enough to keep the biting wind outside.

Without talking - the wind made communication almost impossible - they came closer and closer to the top of the hill, a heavy layer of snow scrunching under Tony’s metallic boots whereas Loki was still! - barefoot. The inventor had no idea how that was even possible, but it was not the time to ask these questions now.

His wariness grew the closer they came, even more so because he still had not the slightest clue what they were approaching from what he could make out on the screens.

It became clear, however, when they reached the top of the hill and both men instantly halted at the fascinating sight.

In front of them, in the middle of what, at a closer look, turned out to be a gigantic impact crater, was the wreck of a Chitauri ship. Halfway bored into the soil, the ship protruded from the ground, towering above them in all its
ruined pride. Blackness against blackness, the bizarre forms of the ships compartments were only distinguishable from the night sky because of the snow slowly coating the sharp edges and strange, organic patterns. Scattered around it were huge parts of debris, giving a simple explanation of the part which they had found on the street.

It was a ghostly scenery, at the same time fascinating and oppressive.

"I remember those. It's one of their mother ships."

Yes, Tony remembered very well, even though the glimpse he had caught when flying through the portal had only been short. In the whole devastating war that had followed, he had not seen one of those again - until now. When still intact, thousands of Chitauri could have fit in there - the thought caused a shudder to run down his spine.

They could only guess where those were now...

"I wonder why it has crashed...", Loki added for consideration, but then marched on.

The engineer followed soon after, mesmerized by the giant construction and the measurements Jarvis provided him with about the sheer size of the ship. At least one third was buried below ground level and still, when he looked up, he could not make out where the ship ended and the night sky began.

As soon as they had walked around one of the corners, the squally wind abruptly stopped and with it, the snow. The area shielded from the wind was completely free of snow and ice, only a few stray snowflakes found their way beneath here.

Even though Tony was sure the statics of the wreck, as slanting as it was, was trustworthy, it certainly was not a pleasant feeling to make camp under thousands of tons of alien metal.

After reaching a certain point, Loki randomly tossed the bag with their food on the floor and then sat down, ruffling through his hair to free it from ice and snow. Tony went as far as opening his faceplate - he would not leave the suit, even though it would mean a terribly uncomfortable night.

His teeth were clattering, yet he did not have anything which came close to the warmth he found in there.

"Little campfire maybe? Certainly you can do one without wood?"

"I wouldn't recommend that, there might still be fuel somewhere in here..."

Loki let one of his long-fingered hands briefly brush over one the ship-wall, seemingly feeling for any kind of energy that might be left inside of the alien construction.

When he withdrew it again, he only shook his head. There was nothing in here, apparently, and as it looked like, Loki did not plan to go on with the campfire-plan.

Tired and cold and slightly annoyed, an annoyed grumbling as a response was everything the god got from him, then he sat down, as close to the wall as possible.

The wind howled louder around them, but within the ship's shadow it was almost quiet – cold, but shielded from wind. Unfortunately, they had not been able to take their blankets with them, the little bit of nourishment they had left had been the absolute limit of what they had been able to carry.

What they had was food, and so, Tony went for a can of tuna, fingering it out if the bag with his metal clad hand.

The same with his bare feet, Loki showed inhuman abilities of resilience regarding food. Neither did he take something for himself, nor had he shown any kind of hunger for the last... two days.
Maybe his body would not require any more food, or sleep, extracting the necessary energy only from the Tesseract.

Yet, Tony quickly forgot about such futile questions when he realized that opening a can of tuna when you could not feel your fingers and had them in a metal glove was as close to impossible as doing calligraphy with a fire hose.
The Mark Omega might have been able to accomplish some stunning tasks, but the limit of precision was reached here.
Tony cursed when he accidentally broke off the metal clip, but then Loki interrupted the sad spectacle.

"Do you intend to stay inside that suit for the entire remaining time?", he asked, picking the can out of the Tony's fingers and opening it with a spell.
The genius decided not to be peeved about accepting help from the other, since it meant immediate food.

"Sure. In case you forgot: I'm still a mostly average, middle-aged mortal. Those tend to die of hypothermia pretty quickly."

The tuna can was snapped out of Loki's hand and Tony started eating.

"If you want, there would be another alternative, a more comfortable one - but you have to disassemble the suit for that."

The inventor looked up, giving Loki only a suspicious look and a raised eyebrow. Yet, the other looked pretty serious and Tony knew that he could trust him with his life. Some warmth really would do him well now, whatever Loki was about to do...
The suit released his frame with a low whirring noise, and instantly, Tony regretted his decision.
When the harsh cold met his exposed body, he curled into himself, shivering, but fortunately, Loki did not hesitate long.

A few swift movements and he sat down behind Tony, leaning as close as possible against his back, his arms wrapped around him. Then, without warning, his hands nestled under his clothing, making contact with the skin of his chest and abdomen.
Tony tensed up at first, a reflexive reaction to the icy cold of Loki's fingers on the warmth of his belly, before he noticed that something entirely different was the case.

It was odd only for the first 20 seconds - then, it was like sliding under a thick, heavy duvet. The warmth spreading through his body from Loki's hands was billowing inside of him, leaving no cold toe or frozen back, just calmness and an incredible heaviness in his limbs.

The god seemed to use some kind of spell, at least the way the magic reached all parts of his body simultaneously was simply magic.
It was so heavenly, Tony was inclined to let out a deep, tired sigh. When he felt Loki's chuckle vibrate against his back, he knew he actually had realized that thought, but he did not care.

He smiled as well, leaning closer against Loki and enjoying the engulfing warmth from behind.
Sometimes, being smaller had its advantages. Behind him, he could feel the god's breathing become more even as well, both med equally soothed by the other's presence.

Still, he could not hold back from emptying the complete can - all the comfort in the world did not fill an empty stomach. Loki just shook his head when Tony reached up with the can, either not hungry or more generous than it was good for him.
They remained silent the entire time, as if words could somehow destroy the sudden, unexpected intimacy. After their departure, their night spent together had felt more and more like a wild, lucid dream, too impossible to be true.

Yet, sitting here like this brought back the memories and made them real again.

The wind howling around the corners did not reach them, the dark, blurred night could not come close enough to threaten them. Even the cold, usually seeping through every tiny gap could not harm them - as long as they were together, they would be unstoppable.

Chapter End Notes

So random chapter is random? Or not so random?
We had the scene with the car and with the snowstorm planned for a while longer, but it did not turn out as intended...

We're sending this story on a hiatus until the 20th December. I'm loaded with work for university and my friend has finally found a flat in the city where she's studying and will move before Christmas. The next chapter is important and we are actually looking forward to write it, so we don't want to mess it up by being rushed and unconcentrated.
Comments will of course all be read and replied.

We're sorry, and Merry Christmas to all of you, if we shouldn't get to post the next chapter before the 24th :)}
Collision

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dark ruins and howling wind - that was everything Steve had seen during the past days, aside from a day of snow. The snow had melted away by now and had later been replaced by a frosty dryness that made breathing unpleasant - until now.

Maybe a thousand feet away from them – hard to say through the binocular – Steve had made out the two persons they had been looking for.

“It's pretty dark, but I'm positive it's them.”, Steve said when he dropped the binoculars and turned around to face the two assassins standing behind him.

They looked miserable and he felt sorry for them. He himself did barely feel the cold, the supersoldier-serum held his metabolism up, producing enough body heat to endure the cold. The two other humans, however, although well-trained and strong, had to fight against the cold for several days now. It could have been worse if not for the specialized SHIELD gear, but even that was not sufficient to withstand the harsh winter-breeze.

“Great, finally.”, Clint mumbled, shivering visibly. Natasha was far more skilled in hiding her discomfort and seemed not that bothered by the cold as her partner, yet Steve knew it affected her as well. They needed to finish this mission soon.

“Any details? Does Stark have a suit?”

Natasha's tone was as professional as always, one of her hands resting on the gun on her belt.

“Unfortunately, yes. Loki looks unarmed, though.”

“Do you really believe that he's unarmed?”

The spy's green gaze met his, calculating, almost challenging.

They knew what to do with Tony - at least up to the point where their former teammate would start attacking them, which was not improbable – but Loki was an entirely different case. They did not know what condition he would be in nor the possible extend of his abilities. The only thing they knew for sure was that they had to defeat him and take him into custody as quickly as possible - a task difficult enough in itself. Steve knew that it was possible, he had seen the god defeated several times now. Smashed into the ground by the Hulk, delirious and chained in the hospital or panicked and too weak to fight back in the empty mansion – Loki was not invincible.

Yet, simply the fact that the Asgardian had made it so far was proof that he was not in a bad condition.

For now, the three had to be grateful for as much as finding their targets - it had taken enough time.

They had relied on subtle marks and rough guesses, nothing but vanishing tiremarks in the dust. The smoking, blown up cellar had been their the first real clue, a wrecked SUV caught in a rift the second. Everything after had been nothing but dumb luck and a good instinct on the assassins side,
eventually leading them into another entirely destroyed town. If you could call a few ruins and a lot of dirt still a 'city'.

Barely more than a few walls were still standing, a range of dark silhouettes against the dusky sky.

They had taken position on the roof of a concrete-bungalow, one of the few buildings still intact within all the destruction. It was the perfect spot to keep an eye on the two persons in the destroyed town's center. They had stopped moving for a couple of minutes now, talking about something.

“I think they are about to split up, probably looking for food.”, Clint remarked, gazing at the two shadows in the distance, tightening the grip around his bow.

Steve could tell how much the archer was looking forward to use the weapon on Loki. He never got his desired revenge on the god, and although the supersoldier did not approve of it, he knew that he would probably not do anything to prevent it. His main focus was on Tony.

“Good.”, Steve eventually replied.

Indeed, soon after, they could see one of the figures in the distance moving away, before it vanished between the ruins. Natasha took another glance through the binocular.

“Loki has moved away northwards, Tony to the opposite- Hey, Steve! Wait!”

Natasha's exclamation was followed by a curse in Russian when Steve jumped off the roof in a smooth movement and made his way towards the inventor, running through the empty streets. He knew it was foolish, might have even considered life-weary; but it was probably the only chance of talking to Tony alone. There was no guarantee he would have more than a few minutes to talk to his friend alone.

“Tony!”

The shout had left Steve's mouth the moment he caught sight of the metallic suit. He came to an early stop several feet away, taken aback by the changed appearance of the suit with its blackish metal and the blue glow emitting from it.

Then, very slowly, the machine turned around.

Two blue slits were staring at Steve, impossible to say if Tony looked surprised beneath the metal mask or if he had expected him. When the visor opened, the face beneath was deprived of any emotion.

Tony looked different from the way Steve remembered him – different, but still like the same person. His appearance was haggard, cheeks hollow from obvious malnourishment, the skin paler, the dark circles under his eyes more prominent than ever. His hair and beard had grown longer than the old Tony would have ever deemed it appropriate – not extremely long yet, but it added to the picture of squalor.

Still, Tony did not appear weak or tired, no, quite the contrary.

The thinness of his face gave his features a new, sharp and dangerous look, but it were his eyes that had changed the most. There was no more apathy in there, no more weariness, neither the confusion and insecurity Steve had witnessed at their last meeting. Determination and an unspoken anger spoke from behind these dark orbs, almost reminding him of the Tony Stark he had met back in the Helicarrier almost two years ago.
Only, that back then the sight of the other had not filled with cold dread.

"Rogers.", Tony eventually stated, all hints of emotions he might feel concealed by a cool, indifferent tone, "What's your business here?"

The question seemed genuine, and Steve could not judge Tony for that. Who would be sentimental and ridiculously loyal enough to follow an old friend thousands of miles into a wasteland – a 'friend' that had injured him so severely upon their last meeting?

Maybe Tony expected that he was up to hit him senseless for hitting him senseless back then during the failed attempt to settle in the empty mansion. Yet, Steve's appearance spoke differently, and he had deliberately chosen to make a non-hostile impression. He was not in uniform and he wore the shield on his back. With his blond hair, ruffled from the wind, and his old leather jacket over a plain t-shirt, he might even have looked a little bit lost. The old Tony surely would have made a snide remark about it, but this Tony just kept staring at him with a piercing look in his eyes.

It was hard to tell if the inventor felt anger about his appearance, confusion... or might have even been happy to see a familiar person's face again after spending weeks in the wilderness of dead cities and gray landscape with only an insane god as his companion.

Then, Steve noticed how Tony's eyes darted to the side, only for a millisecond, though, but obvious. The inventor was weary, waiting for the two assassins to attack them.

Natasha and Clint had not told Steve what exactly had occurred the last time they had met, but he was sure it was nothing Tony liked to remember. He had to make his intentions clear before Tony would draw any wrong conclusions.

"We have to talk, Tony. Alone."

Steve should have expected it, yet the inventor's wry pitying grin was still not the reaction he liked to see. Maybe his request sounded ridiculous to the other's ears, but it was truly meant.

The soldier's face hardened when he realized that the approach as a friend would not lead anywhere. So, he would have to speak as Captain America, then – which did not mean it would make this conversation the least bit easier.

"It speaks of your qualities that you ran after me into a nuclear-contaminated war zone for a little chit-chat, but I'm more than busy at the moment. So - get lost."

Of course, one brusque rebuff did not encourage Steve, he did neither leave, nor was he surprised. Just a little sad – he knew it would be a difficult task, his pleading and well-meant words had not changed his mind when Tony had been drinking himself into oblivion and it surely would not be any easier now.

"I disobeyed Fury's orders to follow you - who'd love to see you dead, by the way - and it is no exaggeration when I say that I'm the only one left rooting for you back home. There is not enough time for you to weigh your options, because there is only one option that offers you something like a future - and that is coming with me. Right. Now."

"You don't think far enough, Rogers, your horizon is still restricted. Don't waste your time by appealing to that old nostalgic idiot you somehow still think inside of me. He's got nothing to say any longer. Just do me a favor and tell me how long it will take before Romanoff and Barton are here, 'cause I want to be gone before they arrive and things get messy."
"Then you're a bit too late."

The archer's voice was unmistakable, the fact that he was shouting from a distance behind and above him told enough for the genius to know that there was an arrow pointing at Tony's head right now.

Yet, even the direct threat of having a piece of metal jabbed through his head could not do other than pry a smile onto the inventor's face. Then the face-plate closed with a final click - a clear sign that the talking was over.

"Not this time, guys."

Steve felt his heart sinking when Natasha and Clint appeared on the stage. Of course, he had expected a reaction like that, but he had really hoped to avoid it.

"Put your weapons down, we're not here to fight. It won't work like that! Stop it, now!"

For a short moment, Clint looked as if he was about to lower the bow, but it only lasted a second. The next moment the bowstring was taut again, ready to shoot an arrow right in the Iron Man's head. An arrow that would probably do nothing more than leave a faint scratch on the metal surface.

Tony had turned around to face the two assassins, Clint on the roof and Natasha on the other side of him, examining them for a short moment. Then, a dry chuckle emerged from beneath the mask, sounding metallic through the suit's speakers.

"Really Steve? That's why you came here? Do you seriously think that it was going to work like that? You tell me everything is fine, I return with you to a place where I'm not welcome – no wait, where everyone wants my head - and then what?!!"

The words hit home, because they were true – Steve knew his plan had been naive, he had always been known for being too good-natured, but his naivety came with an even greater stubbornness.

"And what are you doing here then? You're just as naive, thinking you can defeat an entire species all on your own - only with a maniac at your side - and succeed?"

The inventor had turned back to him, yet the faceplate remained closed, but simply the thought that Tony might be grinning beneath made his blood boil with anger.

Out of the other's sight, Natasha had moved closer from behind, the Widow's Sting around her wrist ready for deploy. This situation was going to escalate in less than a few seconds.

Steve took a deep breath, before he appealed to Tony again, unable to keep himself emotionless.

"Please, Tony. I'm not asking you as a SHIELD soldier to stop this, but as your friend. We could fight together, just like back then. We were a good team. Think realistically, Tony. This way will get you killed with no worthy reward. After all the effort, I can tell that this isn't what you are aiming at."

Steve could see that Tony was about to reply, probably something that was aimed to hurt, but it never came to that.

The noise of something snapping echoed through the empty town, closely followed by a strangled scream. The three persons on the ground abruptly whirled around to stare up at the source of the noise.

On the spot where Clint had been only a few seconds before, stood Loki.
The god was dressed in black rags, hair messy and dirty, looking more intimidating than ever before.

Had the armor he had worn during the invasion given him an impressive and regal look, now he appeared more like a rabid mongrel, an unpredictable animal that would jump at your throat and tear it out before you even had a chance to think about protecting yourself.

Loki held Clint at his nape from behind and had him hanging loosely over the edge of the two-storey roof.
The archer was fighting and struggling, but he had no chance against the superior strength that held him. His bow laid snapped into two pieces somewhere on the ground.

"You are much too predictable. It does not take a genius to assume that you would only dare to approach once we were separated or in a vulnerable position.\textmd{, the god growled, his voice resonating through the empty streets.}\textmd{So it had been a trap?}\textmd{Involuntarily, his head jerked around to look at Tony, who had risen his faceplate again to stare up at Loki.}\textmd{Had he known about this, and went along with it? The inventor's surprised look suggested otherwise, but did not help to dampen the panic that begun to creep up Steve's spine.}\textmd{Clint's aggressive, yet hoarse insults were getting weaker with every second. Nobody moved, but they all shared the same thought: Loki could kill him within a second if he liked to.}\textmd{A broad, malicious grin spread on the god's face, his eyes glittering with amusement, undoubtedly enjoying to see all of them helpless at his mercy.}\textmd{Licking his lips, the gesture again reminded Steve way too much of a wolf licking its bloodied muzzle than of a person you could negotiate with.}\textmd{The cold, bright spark in his eyes spoke of an unrestrained desire for a fight. For killing.}\textmd{"Everybody listen to the maniac, he has a point. And now..."}\textmd{Apparently, whether he was surprised or not, Tony saw this as the perfect opportunity to make a point and show them who had the power in this encounter.}\textmd{A low hissing noise, then he activated the repulsors, letting the suit, intervened by this intense blue, light up dangerously. The engineer lifted his palm only slowly, pointing at Natasha, since she was still the only person standing in a fighting stance.}\textmd{"...I strongly advise you to fuck off. I bet our little bird will love the feeling of having solid ground under his feet again."}\textmd{Cautiously, Steve took a step back.}\textmd{The change in the suit's appearance was visible and he did not know what this new piece of tech might be capable of. He knew that Tony had not build in nothing else but a dirty cellar hole, still, everyone who was aware of the inventor's abilities could be sure that this did not mean a disadvantage.}\textmd{Natasha, all visible weaponry lowered in a gesture of diplomacy, was the first one to speak up again. Although it was her partner up there, the person closer to her than anybody else, she did not let it shine through.}\textmd{She did not even look at Loki, depriving him of the attention he was demanding. Instead, she directed her words at Tony again, looking right into the bright blue of the repulsor without...}
"We came to negotiate, Stark, negotiate what you have to give up so you can regain your life. If you want to fight, then be sure it will be your doom. We will take you and Loki down, if necessary, but I personally don't wish to."

"You can't fight your friends, Tony. You're not that kind of person. Tell Loki to let him dow-"

Just when Steve undermined Natasha's words with a more personal note, a shot resounded through the house walls around the town, a second later followed by a louder blast when the bullet from the Widow's gun hit Clint's quiver, causing multiple small explosions from his precious arrows.

Several things happened within the short episode of the next five seconds:
Loki's grip breaking loose from the archer's nape as he stumbled a step backwards, Clint in free fall - his uniform smoking but otherwise apparently unharmed - pulling out a knife to dig it in the house wall's stone to cushion his otherwise deadly fall, Natasha whirling around to fire at Loki, Loki wiping the bullets out of the air with one wave of his arm, then the ground under Natasha exploding in blue light, hurling her against the next wall.

That's when Steve knew that it was too late.

While Natasha and Clint were struggling to come to their feet, Loki was aiming his powers at the next person to knock out. Like a cat with mice, he seemed to want to play with them first, not killing them at the spot - although he could. He did not look impressed by the small explosion, even though his clothes were still slightly smoking. The second he could make out the magic flare up within him anew, Tony shot a warning blast at him, successfully making the god freeze mid-movement.

"We don't kill them, Loki! Calm down."

Loki looked stunned for a short moment, wide eyed and unmoving, but that state only lasted for a few seconds. Then, his face morphed into something akin to a suppressed rage.

“What do you gain from letting them live?! They come here and have the impudence to lie in your face. They would kill you and me, if they had the chance!”

Faster than a human could have ever managed it, Loki dove towards Clint who was closest, grabbed him by his right arm and hurled him towards the ground in front of Tony. A moment later Natasha was also whirled in the air, obviously by magic, and thrown with an unhealthy speed onto her partner on the ground.

“I deliver you your enemies to your feet, I would advise you to take this offering!”, the god hissed, his eyes glittering with a strange blue hue.

“Fuck, Loki, I said we don't kill them!”

On the ground, Natasha and Clint were struggling to get up, but some invisible force kept pressing down on them. It was frightening to see the otherwise so capable assassins defenseless like this, and although Steve had wanted to avoid exactly this situation, he knew that there was no chance he could stop this whole ordeal with mere words.

Damn, Natasha and Clint would get killed if he did not do anything!

The shield was strapped to his arm, the movement well coordinated and practiced, and with running steps Steve gained momentum, closing in on the god with the Vibranium in front of him.
Only in the last moment before the shield hit Loki's head, the god whirled around. Every trace of amusement had vanished from his features and had been replaced by anger. He was not playing anymore, that much was sure.

Loki's hands lit up with a blinding blue, then he caught the impact of the shield aimed at his head an inch before it hit its aim.

The repulsion was like ramming the shield into a wall and Steve tried to yank it out of the god's grip with all of his power. In between their grimly determined movements, he caught a short glimpse of the other's face – he had not been wrong about the blue in Loki's eyes. Now, the faint tinge of color had turned into the same scorching blue that was emitted from his hands, the wide and black pupil building a strong contrast.

Steve knew this shade of color only too well.

With a harsh yank, he tore his shield out of the god's grip again - leaving red glowing welts where the other's fingers had heated the metal - and took a leap back. Yet, the god was unrelenting and attacked anew – Steve tried to bring his shield back into position, but Loki was already too close. One glowing hand grabbed the edge of the shield, shoving it out of the way with a strength that was definitely more than muscle mass, to make room for the other hand.

The soldier only felt a hot pain when Loki's fingers suddenly clawed into his abdomen, burning through clothing and skin like heated metal spikes. He was aiming to kill, to rip him open with his mere hands.

However, before it came to this, Tony appeared right behind the god, grabbed him with rigorous force and tossed him away. Steve felt the fingers gliding out of his flesh and his hand immediately went to hold the wound. He ground his teeth, for a short moment taken aback by the painful injury.

Only vaguely, Steve became aware that he would have been dead, if Tony had not removed Loki in the last second.

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"You okay, Steve?"

Tony threw a quick glance at the supersoldier who just nodded at the Iron Man's face-plate with a slightly pained expression, apparently not realizing the accidental switch between name and surname. Yet, before he could say another word or have a look at the two assassins who were still somehow glued to the floor, a massive force hit him out of nowhere. Rushed from his feet like a feather-light leaf in a strong autumn breeze, the inventor was hurled through the air, only able to stop himself from crashing into the next brick wall by his reflexive use of the power of his thrusters.

He knew what had hit him - especially since he had not seen it coming.

"If you are a coward and lack the conviction to carry to the limit, at least stay out of my way while I do the work that is supposed to be ours!"

Yes, he knew it had to be Loki, but still, when he looked up and saw him, standing on the other side of the street, radiating this strange, cold heat again that seemed to set him aflame from the inside and gave him that intimidating glare, Tony felt disappointed.
He could not say that he had not been able to foresee something like this, but anyway...

Probably this was not about Tony himself, but about Loki's revenge for his defeat back then in New York. Yet, simply disregarding his principles, the lives of people whom he had considered friends - this was not even remotely close to what he called 'okay'.

It also was not what he had experienced the other to be like, in the privacy of their limited shared space. Either this was the Loki he had thought to have overcome, or this was not Loki at all... but what the Tesseract could provoke him to be.

Honestly, he had no idea what was worse.

Clenching his teeth, he straightened his posture, ready to hit some sense in the god. He seemed to practically beg for it.

"Remove that spell, Loki. Let them run home."

"I did not consider you that stupid."

The small chuckle coming from the trickster told enough about his intentions, but his focus seemed to have moved from the two assassins or the Captain to Tony alone. As if the real reason behind this did not matter any more, once the magic pulsing through Loki's body became strong enough. The only thing necessary was an aim.

"If you won't, then I will."

With that, Tony dashed forward, towards the two agents. He did not even know whether it was possible to break their restricting spell with physical measures alone, yet he did not even come far enough to try it.

"I said NO!"

Again, he was stopped without being touched, an adamant, yet invisible force hitting him like a wall, pure energy exploding in front of him, leaving a crater in the asphalt. Shock and a short, harsh pain sparked through his body, then he crashed. This time, he could not cushion the fall, but landed in a heap of debris.

Some really bad curses left his mouth when he came to his feet again in a thin cloud of gray dust, small chunks of debris crumbling from his body. This was no joke any longer.

Foregoing any more verbal warnings, he changed into offense, speeding back towards Loki unbraked, hitting him frontally and carrying him with him, away from the others. He only heard something akin to an angered hiss, then a strong, focused hit of the god's elbow made him lose his grip.

All Tony was able to see was Loki falling over a hundred feet to the ground, turning around mid-air to have a proper landing without any damage, but it was already too late. He had not been fast enough to see the wall right beneath him, so his heavy body crashed right onto it. The brittle construct was crushed under the impact of the god's fall, burying him beneath.

Tony had steadied his flight again, waiting for the other by flying in loops, his eyes fixated on the sensors in his HUD in anticipation of any warnings signs.

However, he flinched at the sudden burst of stones being wiped away as Loki freed himself from his temporary stone grave.

“How fortunate that you finally show where your true priorities lie!”, Loki screamed at him before he had even found back to a stable stance, his voice echoing from the empty walls.
He made a leap forward and jumped onto the next wall – an unstable thing, barely a few feet high – climbing up onto the half-collapsed roof of another building.

“Get down here, you coward!”

His screaming was loud, so loud that it almost made his voice hoarse from the strain. Tony did not comply, trying to calculate how many of these words were truly meant and what percentage only used to manipulate. Whatever was going on inside of the god, it infuriated him: from his hands, spreading like a malicious disease, his entire lower arms were engulfed by the blue fire.

A ball of energy was thrown after the Iron Man, then another one. As Loki missed the second time, he let out another angry roar, and the whole ground shook with energy. Some nearby walls collapsed and a low rumbling noise filled the silence that was hovering above the entire town.

“COWARD!”

"Poison dwarf certainly is more accurate than norse god...", Tony muttered inside of his helmet, before he had to evade another magical cannon ball.

As nice as it was to have a little air up hear to breath and think, he knew that time was running out. There was tension building up, something seething inside of Loki, ready to break free beyond his control, the air already charging with a dangerous kind of electricity.

The sensors of the suit were producing mystery numbers to prove the bad feeling, but his eyes were fixated on a small window in his HUD which showed the figure of Loki on the ground, zooming in on all his rage and the senseless tantrum he was having. It was easy to dodge the attacks up here, but Tony knew that it was only a matter of time before the god would not be satisfied with yelling insults any longer and start getting real. He would not let it come to this - even though he had no particular plan on how to make him stop.

There was nothing he could do from up here, he had to reach through to Loki directly. Wondering what he would actually do now, Tony accelerated once again. Plans were terribly overrated anyway.

As soon as Loki saw him approaching, the frequency of his attacks doubled, forcing the Iron Man to zigzag his way down, before he suddenly turned with an elegant swerve to the side, just a few feet away from the god. Exploding concrete plastered his trace, until he vanished out of the god's sight behind a building. A second later, two telecommanded missiles emerged from the other side of the building, hit on both of Loki's sides and exploded. Everything disappeared behind a thick cloud of dust, leaving Loki blind for just a second too long, before Tony broke through the gray layer of dirt, landed in front of him and gave his face a blow with his right.

If he had hoped for something like a sobering effect of a hit to the head, he had been wrong. Instead, it was like he had tried to extinguish a grease fire with water.

Loki exploded, did not even halt for a second, but directly started clawing at him like a wild animal. Burning fingers bored in the metal on his arms and shoulders, his enraged snarl only a blurry image in front of his face-plate, dust everywhere around them as they both slithered on the lose debris on the ground, trying to gain a leg-up on the other. Quickly, Tony realized that there was no space for a talk, he had not even enough breath to yell at the god. A metallic fist in the other's stomach did not make him stop, a repulsor blast, strong enough to tear
apart a human, only slowed Loki down for a second after he had been hurled away, before he attacked again fiercely.

If not for the Mark Omega, Tony had been dead meat by now. Yet, he knew Loki, he had fought him once and it was the same power fueling their actions - raw and unpredictable in the god, controlled, yet limited in the circuits of his own suit.

The moment he had the chance, holding both of Loki’s hands above his head, grabbed on their wrists, he used it, feeling more like yelling at a firestorm than at a person.

"Don't be a fucking ANIMAL, Loki! Get your mind straight!"

“Don't be a traitor!”, Loki yelled back, his teeth bared in a display of pure aggression.

There was no sign of understanding in Loki, not a single word seemed to permeate this wall of aggression and contempt. As if he really meant what he said – as if he had forgotten everything what had happened throughout the last weeks.

The boiling magic inside of him raged mercilessly, and with a blast, Tony was pushed away by an energy blow, being catapulted through the collapsing walls of several ruins.

He had not even time to shield his head with his arms as bricks, debris and metallic pipes and steel joists hit him. All he could do was gritting his teeth and closing his eyes until he came to a halt.

Through all the adrenalin and the seething emotions, a wave of pain dared to overwhelm him as he finally found himself motionless on his back. His mouth left a pained grunt as he tried to turn around and get up again, but Loki was faster again.

Out of nowhere, he leaped forward and his hands hit where he knew his heart pulsing underneath the metal shell.

White, hot pain scorched through his entire ribcage, wiping out his thoughts for a second and his own strangled scream shrilled in his ears, muffled by his helmet. Then a harsh jolt and he was thrown into another wall, buried beneath tons of collapsing concrete.

The ear-shredding noise of crumbling concrete had not even completely subsided yet, before Tony blasted the stones out of the way, not unlike Loki before. Movements more mechanic than coordinated, he freed himself, before he set the god as his aim again and blocked the pain in his muscles and bones.

Going on full speed with his thrusters, Tony hit Loki’s temple with his metal fist, power strong enough for a serious skull fracture. However, the god was a touch little motherfucker and the pain dampened his fighting spirit not in the least.

Quite contrary, it only heated it further.

Like every hit only released a new reserve of energy, he started grasping everything metallic he could get a hold of – a shoulder plate, a metallic neck – and kept holding onto it like his life was depending on it.

Tony struggled to free himself of his grip, but was hurled against another wall the next moment, Loki jumping close behind. He landed onto the suit, his heavy weight pressing down on him, and they had a brief struggle on the ground, a struggle that Loki seemed to win – until the genius managed to break free his arm and press a gauntlet to the side of Loki’s head to release a repulsor blast.

The god's body was hurled to the side in a blue ray of light, defenseless and uncontrolled, and Tony scrambled to his feet again.

Approaching the trickster on the floor, he seemed dizzy and disorientated, unable to get up as his
superior body was still occupied by repairing the damage done to his head. There was a large wound - nasty, but nothing compared to what a human head would look like now - covering the whole side of his head with dark blood, crossed by streams of blue as the healing process took place.

Tony had to act quickly, otherwise he would have the other clawing and screaming at him again in less than a minute. Throwing overboard any sense of fair play against a wounded on the ground, he did the only thing which could increase the chance of pinning the god to the floor a little longer: he lifted his boot, then rammed it down on Loki's back with all his body weight.

A chopped scream left the other's lips, followed by ragged, shaky breaths, but quickly he found his speech again.

“What are you going to do now, kill me instead of them? Was that your plan all along?!”, Loki snarled, his hands still clawing desperately at the stone to get back into an upright position.

"Do you actually listen to what you say?!"

Tony had deemed it safe to open his mask, sucking in the fresh air with heavy breaths, almost enjoying the biting cold in his lungs. Although he was not at his limits, he was covered in a thin layer of sweat - he sure as hell was happy that they actually were supposed to be on the same team.

Having stepped back a little to look down on Loki, he allowed himself the vague hope that the god would get up now, look around and see what this had come to. They had spent enough time doing this.

On the ground, the trickster had struggled to get into a sitting position again, his head resting in one hand. As he looked now, Tony almost regretted that last kick, but as soon as Loki opened his mouth again, all regret was wiped away.

"Do you?! There's only one way or the other - either we fight together, or we fight each other."

Tony rolled his eyes, unable to find a serious answer to this schizophrenic bullshit Loki was concocting. Was he actually serious?!

"Just stay here, I'll get back to you when you stop talking jibberish."

There was a dangerous long time of silence in which Loki neither moved nor looked Tony in the eyes. When he eventually answered, he sounded resigned.

"I had thought you more intelligent..."

Too late, the genius saw the blue lightening up again, running from the tips of Loki's fingers upwards along his hands and arms; too late, he realized the change in Loki’s voice as the low mumbling became a dark growl, before he suddenly snapped.

"...so, I will kill them MYSELF!"

The hand around his ankle came out of nowhere, throwing him off balance and tearing him to the ground in one rash movement. Loki was above him in the next second, his hand grabbing the metal over his throat, before he crashed the back of his head into the asphalt. Once, twice, more than five times, until the whistling pain in his head was almost unbearable and he could not see straight any longer.

When Loki left him, Tony's head felt like sludge, his brain screeching "Concussion!", while he still
knew, that he had to get up and get after him. Fuck, he would kill them, Tony HAD to get after him!

Yet, he felt unable to move just now, his head swimming and his vision doubling and shifting every time he dared to move his head even an inch. The shrill tinnitus in his ears was still drowned by the massive rumbling of whole buildings being wiped out of Loki's way, indicating the way he was taking and that nothing would stop him.

With a long drawn-out groan, he got up again, scrunched up his face in a grimace of pain, then got to his feet in an entirely unsexy fashion. Driven by the inescapable knowledge that only a few streets from him, Loki was about to make the threats about his killing rampage become true, he staggered forward.

Finally on the street again, he took a deep breath and pulled himself together. The mask hiding his bruised face again, he activated the suit and followed the fighting noises.

Apparetly, not a second too early.

When he appeared behind one of the last large buildings still standing, he immediately spotted two beings on the floor: Loki on top of Steve, ready to tear him apart.

Without thinking, he accelerated, completely focusing on the back of Loki's head covered in think black strands of hair, making the roar of a powerful engine the last thing the trickster heard before a metal boot hit his head.

The force of impact hurled them both several feet over the floor, tearing open asphalt and leaving a screeching trace of sparks where metal scratched over stone. Until their movement stopped, Tony held Loki in his grip, not letting lose until they had come to a halt and he was on top of him.

Every bit of restraint that might have been left within Loki was gone the moment he realized he was trapped. His movements grew erratic, almost panicked, struggling to break free from the iron grip around his wrists.

Pressing down onto the god's lower body with the suit's entire weight, he waited, enduring the desperate, frantic attempts to wiggle himself free like a serpent caught in the claws of an eagle. Concentrating all of his strength to hold Loki down, he did not realize how long it took for the other to lose his energy and to realize that all of his struggles were in vain.

With a grim look, he kept his eyes on Loki's face, waiting to see a change in his features.

Eventually, after what had felt like hours, the energy seemed to drain from his Loki's muscles – just in time, because Tony was almost starting to shiver from exhaustion. The erratic movements ceased completely and the other went limp, eyes falling shut for a short moment.

It was over. Tony dared to breath again, his face-plate lifting in the same moment.

When Loki opened his eyes again, the inventor was still staring at him. Now, that he could cut back the power he had to muster to keep the other on the ground, the grim, angry glare became tired and another feeling spoke from his dark eyes: disappointment.

The gods body jerked another time, as if trying to flee this glare, but was still restrained without the chance of breaking free.

“Stop it.”

Tony whispered, voice low and more intimidating than screaming could have ever been.
Loki stared at him, silent, then his eyes suddenly went wide for a few seconds. An unasked question spoke from the intense blue which started more and more to fade back into the usual, not less intense green.
Tony just answered his stare with his face unmoved, not loosening his grip the slightest until he was sure that Loki had understood.

"I will remove myself now."

It was said more as a question rather than a statement, forcing Loki to nod slowly.
Now, where the energy had left him so quickly again, he looked drained and tired, the slight confusion in his face making the berserk mongrel look like more like a pup after being scowled by his owner. Even though he had been quiet like this before, this time Tony was sure that he could leave the god without giving him the space for another frantic attack.

As soon, as he had come to his feet again, he extended his hand to help Loki up, but the other scrambled to his feet himself.
He still looked spooked, eyes wide when he looked around and then at Tony's suit which was covered in the deep dents and scratches of multiple attacks and blows. One of his long fingers, smeared with dust and blood, reached out to follow the line of a deep scratch at Tony's shoulder (he could already feel the bruise building beneath the metal), but the engineer slapped his hand away.

As relieved as he was about having Loki back, and, what could not be taken for granted, having him regret what he had done, he was more than a little pissed. If not for the fact that his head was swimming and that he could taste blood in his mouth, probably running down from his nose or his lip or something, he would certainly start yelling any minute. However, he did not, there were more important matters to be finished first.
It looked like Loki wanted to say something, but the inventor shut him up with an angry look, before he left him where he was standing to walk over to the others.

Despite a having a little trouble walking gracefully due to the dizziness, he reached Steve quickly, exchanging a piercing glare with the blonde which none of the two men was willing to interrupt as the first.
As soon as Tony had taken over the fight with Loki, the supersoldier had hurried over to Natasha and Clint's side, trying to be of help. Yet, he had not been able to anything more than stand there while the two assassins recovered from their strange and unpleasant encounter with magic. They were mostly unharmed, but the effect the whole scene had had on them was clearly visible.
Without his bow, Clint looked almost naked, lips pressed together into a small line, staring angrily at the god in the back. Natasha reached out for the gun in her belt as soon as Tony approached, but everybody knew that she would not fire.
It was painful, seeing them like this, even though it meant that they were now successfully eliminated as a potential threat.

"Consider what you just saw the amuse-geule - and now go. You really don't want to know what's for dinner."

"You will stay with him, even after he attacked you??!", Steve blurted out, hurt anger making him forget the wound in his abdomen as he made an abrupt movement towards Tony.

The inventor frowned at the sudden outburst.
Hearing it now, it seemed like a legitimate question, but he would be lying if he would say that he had asked himself this one. It did not need him to throw a glance at Loki who was still standing there on top of a pile of debris, looking terribly lost, to decide. Yes, of course he would stay. Not only were there tons of reasons he had no chance of turning back now, but there was also no way
he would let a power like that run around without surveillance.

"I'm in control. I can stop him if he chucks a hissy again. I know him, better than all off you."

God, he really lacked both the energy as well as the will to have this discussion again. If they still needed a punch in the face to understand what he meant, he was this close to granting them that wish..

“It’s nothing but your hubris that you think you know him, Stark. This whole ordeal will be your end. If Loki doesn’t kill you, SHIELD will do it, sooner or later. Or the Chitauri.”

All eyes went to Natasha, who did not really look as if she had been barely more than a hair's breadth away from death a minute prior.

Yet, Tony was not impressed – his indifferent mask shifted, and he grinned, small wrinkles forming around his eyes.

“Do I really look like a man who cares?”, the inventor eventually asked, the coldness in his voice betraying the smile on his face.

“I care about you, Tony.”

Steve could not hold back any longer, the disappointment and the disbelieving pain was written all over his face. He looked miserable, his hair ruffled and dirty, face flushed and scratched. He looked like he really cared and Tony knew that he did, but this was not of his concern any longer.

Nobody said it out loud, but this was the moment of good bye – and Steve knew it as well as Tony did.

The inventor's expression remained unreadable, his gaze meeting Steve's without blinking.

“Tell me, Steve: If you were me, would you turn back now, throw away everything that has been build up? Return to a place where you have nothing left that makes life worth living?”

The following silence was answer enough.

“I'm sorry. For the shit I did to you in that mansion and for making you run after me the whole way here - that doesn't apply to you two assholes-”, Tony regarded the assassins only with a brief look, “-but do us the favor and let Loki and me do what we came for. You saw what happens if you try to intervene.”

With that, the mask snapped back into place and covered the dirty and bruised face, then Tony turned his back to the three with the strong intention to never see them again. Being the sober realist that he was, he would not lose himself in thoughts about possible other outcomes of this once so promising friendships.

His responsibility was waiting in the other direction now. Walking away to the dark silhouette in the distance that was Loki, he heard Steve's voice a last time.

“Good Luck, Tony.”

Chapter End Notes
Yaaaaay, we're baaaaack!

Steve is really a poor guy in this fic :/
We're so sorry, we love you Steve D:

Also, we think it is important to say that Loki isn't directly mind-controlled by the Tesseract (some people will probably hate us for saying this, but we hate the whole "poor-mindcontrolled-baby" stuff that people sometimes use as an excuse for Loki murdering people, because wow, he definitely didn't do anything like that before he met the Chitauri!), but the energy in his body is interacting with his more primal emotions, mainly aggression.

Also, it was time for a real fighting scene, and two Tesseract-powered weapons fighting against each other seemed pretty badass :P
For two long hours, the sound of footsteps was the only thing to be heard from the two men.

They had left the remains of the city as soon as Tony had turned his back on the three Avengers and were now walking silently further eastwards. None of them had said a word since then, the only way Tony communicated were gruff hand signals or nods.

Of course, Loki knew that saying the mortal was angry at him was a sheer understatement. He could count himself lucky if he managed to get Tony to talk again today. The longer the silence lasted, the more tense the atmosphere grew.

Their early departure from the town was another problem, since they had not been found what they had been looking for – food.

Staying had been out of question for obvious reasons, but nevertheless Loki knew that the lack of food would be a problem for Tony, sooner or later.

The human was not in the best condition anyway, although he tried to pretend that everything was alright, as usual. Yet, Loki, who was walking behind, saw him swaying from time to time, and remembered the blows against the human's head only too well.

The dented and scratched suit spoke volumes about who was entirely to blame for that.

Loki would not try to help Tony, that would mean talking to him, and talking would most likely lead to snide remarks and insults – or no response at all. It would not need too long for the other to find out that they had to stop eventually, to plan or to rest, and then they would have to talk.

However, the expected break came sooner than anticipated.

The only thing that had kept Tony moving during the past hours had apparently been his stubbornness, but at a certain point, even that was not enough any more. Out of nowhere, the swaying suddenly increased and although Loki could see a few desperate attempts to stay upright, they were not enough to defy gravity any longer.

The god leaped forward, and caught the heavy suit from behind before Tony could hit the hard ground face first.

Slowly, he maneuvered the mortal to rest against his chest, before he set him gently down onto the ground. His eyes were focused on the faceplate for a few moments, contemplating whether Tony was unconscious beneath it or just waiting for his dizziness to fade.

Yet, when there was no response, he carefully reached out to touch the mortal, only for his hand to be slapped away with a rough, yet somewhat tired movement.

"Fuck off."

The faceplate opened to reveal the bloodied face beneath.

If Loki had not been very well aware that Tony's condition was no other than his fault, he might have followed the stubborn mortal's demand and moved away. But, that was not the case: This was his mess, he had made it, and he would take care of the consequences.

"You are injured Tony. I can't let go of you now."
"Wow, decent observation Dr. Watson. And whose fault is that?"

The human's tone was angry, biting, but Loki could smell the blood on Tony and saw the dilation of his pupils. The numerous scratches and dents in the suit were even more obvious up close.

"It is my fault.", Loki admitted, "I could not control it. I'm sorry."

Tony made a sour grimace that turned into a pained one a second later, then the suit began to disassemble around his body, revealing the much smaller frame beneath.

"Great, if you are sorry, go on and heal me. Let's get this over with."

There were no objections from Loki's side – he simply did what he was told to. Putting his hands on either side of Tony's head, he let the magic repair the damage he had done barely a few hours ago.

Tony shuddered and clenched his eyes shut.

Did his magic feel different now? It itched Loki to ask, but he knew he would not get a proper answer, not now, after he had ruined so much in such a short amount of time.

Eventually, Tony let out a relieved sight and the wrinkles around his eyes vanished, his features softening distinctly. The mortal had apparently drifted off to unconsciousness for a few moments, before he eventually opened his eyes again.

His eyes darted upwards, then he frowned and his features hardened as he caught sight of Loki.

The god moved away, allowing the human to sit up, yet stayed close at the same time, close enough to feel the faint warmth emitting from his skin.

"You know it won't help you to celebrate your anger like that."

"How come you define what helps me? It feels amazing being angry at you, it's the only thing that keeps me going."

Tony was always more stubborn than it was good for him, and Loki knew that this approach would not work to dampen Tony's anger. He had to try differently.

"I stopped. You... made it stop."

Loki's voice had its deceptively authentic way of sounding remorseful, thankful even, which he had trained for ages, but to a certain extent, he actually was.

It bugged him, yet he was still not entirely able to grasp what had happened when he had sensed the assassins. Loki remembered rage, but also fear that they would do something to Tony, would somehow make their threat to kill him come true.

Once the magic inside him had been let loose, he had felt unstoppable. The power had blinded him.

"By physical force, after you leveled an entire city center. You're out of control, you forget who you are and you forget who I am and that's not out of the world by a simple 'sorry'."

When Tony answered, he looked Loki in the eyes again, stubbornness finally replaced by honest, straight disappointment.

Around them, the cold wind was howling, tearing on Loki's porous hoodie, making both of their hair wave. Tony shivered involuntarily, the movement taking his anger a lot of its power to convince.

They were arguing in the middle of nowhere, it was freezing cold, still miles from New York, about something that could not be changed anymore.
"I will never forget who you are, Tony."

Just when he was about to get up again and make the suit assemble around him, Loki put his hand on Tony's shoulder, successfully causing him to halt. The mortal's presence was alluring, as always, and he knew that this feeling was mutual. There were no protests when he moved his hand from Tony's shoulder to his neck where it touched bare skin. One thumb caressing Tony's stubbly cheek, Loki held his head, forcing their eyes to meet. He knew that the magically induced warmth of his hand was welcoming to Tony, he could see how the small wrinkles around his eyes and the hard line of his lips softened - a movement so small that most persons would have missed it. Unfortunately, it did not last.

"Puppy eyes don't work on me. I'm not so easily bought."

Again, the inventor slapped his hand away and attempted to turn around, but the god would not give up that easily.

“I know that you aren't.”, Loki said quietly, his body moving forward almost on its own accord.

Tony's turned back provided the perfect aim when he snuck his arms around the other's waist from behind, pulling him close.

There was a noise of protest, but it was not loud enough to persuade Loki to let go. He leaned forward to place a gentle kiss on Tony's nape, nuzzling the dark hair while he did so. His lips traced a faint line along the human's neck, before he pressed a more demanding kiss onto the side of Tony's face, right beside the ear.

“I'm really sorry.”, Loki murmured again, really meaning it, his head leaning against Tony's, eyes closed.

"Bet you are.", Tony mumbled, voice already low enough for the wind to carry away his words.

For a few moments, Tony stayed still and let Loki continue, obviously enjoying what the god was doing. It was the best peace-offering Loki could deliver right now, to trivialize what had happened and make it like nothing but a mishap, that he was not like this, although they both knew that this was just an illusion. The silence did not last too long. In such a plain land they were easy targets - however well they were able to defend themselves - and New York still was far away.

They had to move, they had to stick together, even though the trust developed between them had been severely damaged.

Tony turned around slowly, looking Loki straight in the eyes, their faces barely a few inches apart. Wordlessly, he closed the distance between them, bringing their lips together in a long, firm kiss. It was the answer Loki had hoped for, but definitely not the answer that was reasonable.

"I swear to whatever god: if its on the rocks whether I lose you to a shiny blue paperweight, I'm personally gonna pick out every little magic marble in your spine with my bare hands."

“Wont lose control again... and if I do, the Chitauri will be the ones facing my wrath.”

That earned him a frown from Tony, but fortunately, the mortal did not move away and Loki closed in on him for a last time. His arms wrapped around the other, he rested his face against his shoulder, as if Tony might vanish out of his hands if he did not hold him close enough.
Eventually, Loki let go again, the human's warmth only a lingering sensation on his skin. He watched sadly when the metal plates closed around Tony, making him untouchable again. Then his gaze got caught by the deep scratches and dents on the metal surface.

Tony did not miss that.

“Yes, that is your fault too.”

Although the mortal's voice sounded a little more playful this time, Loki could not deny that he felt guilt and shame. Months of hard work had gone into the development of this suit, months without access to the material and the equipment the human would usually have at hand - and he had damaged it within a few minutes.

It could have been worse, of course. If Loki had lost control entirely, together with the ability to distinguish between friend and enemy, even the suit would not have been enough to protect Tony. He would have torn him apart in a whirlwind of fire, but the mortal did not need to know that.

“I will help you to fix it, later.”

“I hope that you do.”, Tony said with obvious amusement, still sounding a little strange from the speakers of his suit. Then, he got up to his feet, turning to face Loki frontally.

”And now, hold still.”

“Wh-”

It was already too late when Loki felt the metal arms closing around him. He knew what would happen, but he could not stop it and the next moment, the ground beneath his feet was gone and they were rushing upwards, higher and higher.

“Stop it, you fool! Let me down!”, Loki yelled, his voice tuned out by the noise of the engine and the howling wind. Unintentionally, the god had clawed onto the metallic surface of the suit, a reflex barely suppressible when you were suddenly flying mid-air.

“They will see us!”

“If there are any of these bastards around, they already know that we are here after all the turmoil you made!”, Tony replied smugly, but Loki knew that this was not the whole reason.

Tony wanted to finally test out his new suit, take it to its limits after he had already seen what it was able to do in a fight. The logic was simple, yet warped: because Loki had messed up earlier, he thought he could mess up now, too.

Loki really, really hated this stupid mortal.

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They were approaching New York City at high speed, the first tails of the surrounding suburbs already visible beneath them.

Surely, it was the area of New York City spreading out in front of their eyes. One could see the coastline from up here, the characteristic form of Manhattan. If Loki had asked, Tony would have been able to point in the vague directions of Brooklyn and Staaten Island, could have told him the
way to the JFK, could have shown him the place where Lady Liberty had usually greeted all her visitors. From the 3D-model he had called up in his HUD, he would have only just been able to find back to where his own tower had once stood.

However, this was not New York City any longer.

Where once had been the central district, the place Tony had lived in throughout several years - years as a boy and a few, much too short years with Pepper - there was a gaping hole of nothingness, of plain land. The square angles of the streets and avenues were still visible, otherwise nothing reminded of the roaring life that had made this city one of the most popular in the world. Remains of ruins, piles of debris where skyscrapers once had towered over the busy people on the ground, or, the closer you came to the spot where the bomb had hit, simply nothing. The nuclear explosion had wiped out every sign of existence, every reminder that not so long ago, people had lived here, with their lovers, their children, their family.

Tony had seen the photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he knew what nuclear devastation looked like - fuck, he could explain to the very detail how the A-bomb worked. Still, what he saw, while they were flying over what had once been New York City, he could not find anything to say. Jarvis, who had been babbling on about the critical levels of radioactivity the whole time, had proceeded to simply show the numbers on the bottom left corner, for reasons of decency.

Even his anger at Loki had momentarily been dimmed at the sight of something so much bigger.

Except for the howling of the airstream, it was as quiet as it had been since they had entered the contaminated zone. The city that never sleeps was gone, was neither sleeping nor dead - it just had ceased to exist. What was left lied beneath them in the rose light of the evening sun. The waves of the Atlantic Ocean peacefully met the shore.

Without a word of warning, the inventor suddenly lowered his position, descending until they reached ground level and Loki could jump, a second before Tony's boots hit the asphalt. He had chosen to land within the suburb still, for numerous reasons. They needed shelter first, he needed to find a way to deal with the radioactivity, with his need for food and drink.

Also, they needed to check for Chitauri before they protruded further into the city center. Well, maybe the did not have to, at all.

As striking as the image had been, as sick as Tony felt now, there was one other thing that disturbed the image he had had in his head even further: there was no sign of the Chitauri. Not one living being down here, he had let Jarvis check for them, he had scanned for their strange flying objects and for the energy signature of their weapons. Nothing. As if they had been wiped out as well, facing oblivion side by side with their human enemies.

His gaze went down the long, perfectly straight line of asphalt they were standing on, lined by neat little identical suburban homes, all empty, all wrecked. Where his gaze lingered now, there should be the silhouettes of the skyscrapers, but there was nothing. He still saw them, though, like the fading photographic negative imprinted in his mind which was unwilling to cope.

Slowly, he turned around to his partner who was directly behind him. He opened his face-plate to see better, but even like this, there was nothing to see, but Loki. He was standing alone on an empty street between empty houses in a city that had been erased from the map of the world. Panic started to well up inside of Tony, a panic that he fought down as hard as he could, but which was uncontrollable.
What if there were no Chitauri any more?

What if what they saw now was literally all there was?

What if everything they had worked up to until now was nothing but a cruel joke? How did you fight if what you were trying to revenge was dead and gone, if the enemies you wanted to fight were not existent anymore?

What if everybody had been right - everybody, but himself?

"Where are they?!"

His tone was low, but urgent, demanding an immediate and satisfying answer, because otherwise, he might explode or implode or any other physical impossibility. Seemingly, Loki had seen the panic in his eyes, even though he was doing his best to appear calm. A few steps and he was at his side, unable to touch him directly, but still letting his hand rest on Tony's arm, locking their eyes.

"We will find them."

Loki spoke without a trace of doubt in his voice, but Tony was almost sure what he saw now was only a facade.
There had to be disappointment within him as well, he had had a plan, too. There would be no battle, no flesh for him to tear apart. He had been longing for this for months now, as had Tony, but it could not be denied.

There were no Chitauri.

Leaving him where he was, Loki started walking further towards the city center, seeming like he had an aim.
Soon after, Tony started following him, more out of a lack of anything else to do than out of conviction.

"I've scanned the entire area, they're not here. Either that, or their ways of hiding surpass my broadest imagination."

It was impossible for the inventor to shut his mouth now. If he had been alone, he would have probably gone ballistic and would have destroyed some houses which would never be inhabited ever again anyway.

"So it seems, yes. I have come to the same conclusion, but we can only be sure after we actively searched the area. There have to be traces."

Maybe Loki meant well, perhaps he was right to a certain point, but he did not have the measurements it needed to know that they were as alone as one could be. The chances to meet a Chitauri here were as high the ones to come across one while taking a stroll on the surface of the moon - hell, your chances to meet one there were probably higher.
A sudden gust of wind drowned their voices, making the broken windows clatter and the grayish brown grass rustle as the dust of the nuclear fallout was whirled in the air. Tony was sure he should probably not breathe in too deeply, but he could not help getting louder.

"Yeah, hurray - that does not solve the problem that we're here and they're not. It's a dead end, obviously. All we find here is what we already know!"

"Don't let your spirit sink, Tony. If they're not here, we will find them elsewhere. They are still on earth."
"They can be taking bubble baths in Haiti for all I care - I need at least a dozen of them here. If there's not at least one ugly alien face to plant my fist in, I-

Loki stopped mid-walking, turned around to Tony and cut his sentence short.

"We will seek shelter first. You need to rest and to fill your stomach. Worry after we searched the area - tomorrow."

"I did not make my way to New York for another night in another muddy shithole with even more fucking canned food and fucking roaches all over the fucking floor!!"

They were both on edge - once one of them had calmed down, it was the other one to throw a tantrum.
He was on the verge to explode for months now, his usual impatience grown to a degree where the slightest disappointment made him want to hit his fist against a wall. Yet, he always behaved, he always held back, because he knew how to wait if the stakes were high and the goal was worth it.

Now, the goal seemed to have simply canceled.

“Calm down Tony, this won't help-”

“Why should I calm the fuck down? There is no one here to hear us!”

Tony made a wide gesture to the desolated area around. Who was Loki to tell him to calm down? He had been calm for months now, Bruce-yogapants-Banner could lick his ass, he was the king of calmness.
Loki opened his mouth to interject, but Tony was not even close to be finished.

“’There is nothing? Do you get it? All the shit we did for the last weeks, thousands of miles! All for nothing!’"

Something surfaced during his last words, some raw, furious energy and despite everything they had talked about before, now, he gave a flying fuck about being rational about their energy storage.

A flash of light, then the nearby ruin of a building collapsed, hit by a repulsor blast.

“See?! Nobody fucking cares when I do this!”

Loki was not listening anymore. Now it was the god who shied away from the inventor, seeking security in the distance.
Tony fired again and again, all the energy spent for battle urging to be released now. Building after building collapsed, ended up molten to unrecognizable heaps, but Tony did not stop until there was nothing left but smoking debris.
He seldom was destructive, and when he was, shit had to have hit the fan. There was nothing he thought about any longer, he did not control what he did, he just let his rage run free, destroying everything what got into his path.
It took some time for him until he saw relatively clearly again.

His breath was going heavy and he was sweating inside the suit, beneath him every building in close proximity destroyed.
Suddenly becoming aware that Loki was right, that this was useless, even counter productive for their task, he ceased to fire and lowered his arm. The suit dropped from a floating state back onto the ground with a metallic clonk and from the corner of his eye, he saw Loki approaching again.
The face-plate opened again, but the expression beneath was the same. Deprived of any emotion, there was nothing left then the bitterness of a man who had to face the fact that his work had been for nothing. They stared at each other for a moment, then Tony looked to the side, his heated breath forming white vapor in front of his face. He felt tired, but the rage from before was subsiding.

“Neither of us could've expected that.”, Loki said.

"It's still annoying as hell.", Tony replied sourly.

Destroying dead objects was not even close to the level of satisfaction he would have achieved when actual living Chitauri soldiers had been his aim, yet the mere physical exertion had done him good to some degree. There was still the problem of what to do next, but now he was willing to opt for the shelter-idea - temporarily.

They would find them, no matter how long it would take.

After all what had gone wrong the last weeks, and there had been plenty of things going wrong, it would have been embarrassing to be discouraged by yet another a disappointment, however big and important. Giving up was not an option.

"I remember you saying something about food and I think I would like to come back to that offer."

The engineer cracked a lopsided grin, indicating that it was safe to speak about something else again without first putting on a bullet-proof vest. Loki seemed relieved, although it was clear that he too was not at all happy about their current situation. Together, they started searching for a shelter, having to walk a little longer, since Tony had destroyed about 60% of the still accessible houses in their close proximity.

When they found one, they went for the cellar, of course. It was probably the worst they ever had, worse than the facility back in Nevada, maybe even worse than the roofless house in the wasteland. It was wet and stunk strangely rotten, since a subterranean pipe had apparently burst at some point and drained a good part of it with water that had been there for way too long.

However, the rest was unbearable anyway, and none of them had any more patience left to look for something more comfortable. Also, it was only a cellar where they had the luck to find actual food. Just that Tony was not able to eat it...

After the genius had explained to Loki that canned macaroni (it always cheered him up at least a little bit to see what people thought fit to put into cans) where not a kind of worms, the god immediately removed the can from his hands. Before Tony could start complaining, he already had the can back. A skeptical look at the other and he nodded, apparently giving him his sign of approval. The fastest decontamination he had ever seen, but who was he to wonder. A filled stomach made the world look like a better place again and made you feel happy about a few old carpets - half of them was soaked with the rotten water, but the other half could be used as sleeping arrangement. Everything was better than sleeping on the concrete ground, although they had done exactly that a few times already.

Finally, Tony watched as Loki placed a small magic fire a few feet away on the ground. Answering the engineers worries, the other explained that this one would not need fuel to burn, nor would it produce smoke, but was enough to heat the chilly air around them.
It was incredible what difference could be made by a small subterreanean room, something to eat and something remotely resembling softness under your tired ass. It made you forget the sight of endless feet of devastated land outside, although only temporarily, and appreciate those small easements.

Appreciate the small things - ha, even though there were no Chitauri here, at least he would find to some piece of Buddhist wisdom instead.

Tony eventually threw away the empty can, then slowly sank down onto the fuzzy, dusty carpet with a long sigh until he was lying on his back, hands resting on his stomach. There was a low chuckle from Loki who sat opposite on the carpet, watching him the whole time, since his hunger seemed to have magically evaporated with the intrusion of the Tesseract's power.

"At least you look like you feel better now."

"How did I look before...?", Tony had closed his eyes, trying to think not of what was outside but only of Loki.

Listening to the pleasant timbre of his voice in the dark, despite the annoying dripping of moldy rainwater in the next room, was soothing and better than any bedtime story he had been read as a child. Here, having the world blocked out, it was easy to forget the monster Loki could be. Tony could not imagine the god going berserk like he had before in a situation like this. It was like this was the version only he was allowed to see, a relaxed and calm version, maybe a bit sad, but truthful and... caring.

"Well, you destroyed some houses."

Now, it was Tony's turn to giggle as he remembered a certain piece of pop-culture.

"You know that.. that Snicker's commercial?"

Even though he had his eyes closed, he could practically feel Loki frown in confusion, even before he opened his mouth to say that he had not the slightest idea.

"'You're not you when you're hungry' and all that- ah, you know what, nevermind."

There was silence between them - except for that damn annoying dripping in the room next door - in which Loki probably attempted to and then failed in finding a reason why he should know anything about a commercial for something called 'Snicker's'.

Tony's thoughts were somewhere else, though. Against his will, his thoughts had left the safe surroundings of this cellar and were roaming free over what was left of New York City. Not the buildings and the famous sights, but what New York had been to him, personally. His tower, his friends, the Avengers... Pepper. The pain when he thought of her was dulled, not because he had stopped caring or because she had lost importance, but because she was so far away to him that he was not even exactly certain whether she had been a dream all along. It was simply too good to be true, having a future like that.

A future so much brighter than the one he was facing now, a future that was filled by the laugh of the woman who had taught him to take a step back for love, by a child - girl or boy, whatever, what did he care -, by him saving the world with the methods he knew best and occasionally by posing in a fancy suit and beating annoying little shithounds of villains who had not understood that they were no longer allowed.

It would have been good things to do for the second half of his life...

When he opened his eyes again, everything was black.
A few seconds, then his pupils had adjusted to the dimly lit darkness again and the small magical fire was powerful enough to illuminate the dirty concrete walls and the cracks in the ceiling. The water was still dripping.

He was struck by an almost unbearable feeling of melancholy, unable to ban the bright images in his head completely. Yet, he had to. He had to shake them off.

With an almost abrupt movement, he sat up again, looking in the eyes of Loki who had been interrupted from his meditative state by his fast movement. They stared at each other for a few moments, then Tony moved forward.

The fierceness with which he kissed Loki almost threw the god over, but he clawed his hands in Tony's pullover, pulling him even closer. Both cold and tired, their hungry kiss quickly heated Tony up from the inside, firing his desire for the other, to have him close and hold onto him. To make sure he would not vanish, too.

When they parted again, Tony's hands remained on both side's of Loki's head, fingers in his thick, black hair, pressing their foreheads together. Between their lips, small clouds of breath mixed.

"You won't leave when this is over, right? I mean, when this is over and we're both still alive. You won't fuck off and go rule some other realm. Stay with me, okay?"

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Of course, the issue had to come up again sooner or later. This doomed question, a question Loki had asked himself several times during these past weeks. He had not been able to answer it yet. Originally, he had planned to return to Asgard, after the defeat of the Chitauri and the elimination of this most dangerous threat to the Nine Realms - if he would be welcome there.

Yet, he had started to question this plan for a while longer now, one single man being the reason behind his doubts: Tony.

The bond that had build between them was one beyond friendship. With Tony, even with his numerous flaws, there was a connection, a deep understanding for each other that had been established within nothing more but a few months. They had been forced to rely on each other in order to survive and so, his former enemy had become a man he would open his bright future for.

Tony was the only one he had ever allowed to see through his perfect facade, just to find out how fragile it actually was. He had seen him broken and raw, all the pathetic truth behind his often cocky demeanor – and yet, he had stayed to support Loki.

Did he really have to ask himself whether he would stay or abandon Tony? Was Tony worth staying, even if it meant that he had to stay on a destroyed planet with a man who had no home, no allies?

How much did Asgard meant to him?

Tony shifted and Loki caught sight of the other's face. This time, it was Tony who looked utterly lost and broken, and although it could be an illusion from the flickering light of the fire, his eyes seemed strangely glossy.

It was the face of man who had come to be confronted with the nothingness that was his existence, who had lost or given up everything he had once held dear.

Still, Loki had not expected what came next.

“Promise to stay with me. You are everything I have left. Promise.”

Loki had known it subconsciously, without really knowing it. Yet, it was an entirely different matter to knew for sure, that, beside the longing for revenge and the plan they had developed, the
only other thing still important to Tony was him.  
Such words no one had ever said to him before.

Everything he had left...

It was maybe foolish, to compare family with a man he had merely met a few months ago, yet to 
think that not even his mother nor Thor had ever made themselves dependent on him like that... it 
was a burden, yes, but it filled a void within him, a void he had carried with him for almost his 
entire life. 
After his fall from the Bifrost, the others had went on with their life, his brother, his mother... Tony 
would not be able to do this.

That last realization finally took off the weight to make a decision, because there was no decision 
to make.

“I promise I will stay with you. Until the end.”

Loki closed his arms around Tony and pressed him to his chest in a close embrace. The embrace 
was not the least bit sexual, only closeness and warmth, a wordless confirmation of what he had 
just said. 
They stayed like this for quite some time, entirely lost in the other's presence - as if the whole 
world around them had ceased to exist. Tony was the one who moved first, his hands finding their 
way back at either side of Loki's head, before he leaned in and kissed him again.

Apparently, enough had been said for Tony's liking.

From their intimate embrace, the mood soon changed again when Tony's kiss became more 
demanding. Loki caught the vibe quickly. 
The god's hands ran through Tony's hair first, fisting a strand of dark brown hair, before he let them 
wander all over his body, still held back by the thick winter's clothing. The inventor kissed Loki 
with all the passion originally spared for upcoming battle, claimed his mouth as his, so that the 
other would not have the chance break his promise.

A short second of breathing, a quick exchange of glances, then eyes closed again and lips found 
together. 
Letting himself fall back, Tony pulled Loki with him until the god was straddling his lap, forcing 
the engineer to tilt his head upwards so that they would not break their kiss. 
Hands were running down Loki's back, he felt how fingers slid through the holes in the ruined 
piece of cloth he wore, brushing over his skin. 
Something had to be done about this condition - when they could allow themselves to let clothes 
become a priority again.

Finally reaching what he had been aiming for, Tony's hands grabbed Loki's firm ass through the 
cover of his jeans, drawing a small gasp from the god, and pulled him close. As a result, their kiss 
broke, but the human did not take it as a sign to stop. 
With unbroken fierceness, he attacked the sensitive skin on Loki's neck, his stubbly cheek 
scratching along his adam's apple when he left small little bite marks all along the line of muscles 
there, causing Loki to shiver. The trail was interrupted, yet only temporarily, as he spontaneously 
pulled off his hoodie and threw it aside, giving Tony more space to let his lips and tongue and 
teeth do their dirty work.

The mortal chuckled at the impatient gesture, then continued where he had left of, his fingers still 
groping his ass, only indicating what it would feel without clothes, while his lips moved down, 
along the trickster's collarbone and further down to let his tongue flick over a nipple.
Loki gasped another time at the teasing touch, his hands never leaving Tony's hair, approving way too much of his doings and his teasing.

They had all the time in the world, now.

They were not being chased any more, they could pace down a bit - even though he felt more like being ravished by the other, being swallowed up in a single bite. Apparently finding that his hands needed a new place to work on, Tony took them away, letting them rest on Loki's thighs. Slowly, he let them run upwards over the rough fabric, placing more gentle kisses where he had been biting a second before. Even with closed eyes, Loki followed the trail of Tony's hands with held breath, until finally, his fingers found the bulge in Loki's pants and, with a determined grip, he pressed his hand down, simultaneously biting down hardly on the god's collarbone.

The god let out a choked gasp, involuntarily rocking forward.

Tony's hands were demanding, knowing where to touch and just how much pressure was good, yet, at the same time, his movements were almost gentle. He had started touching him barely a few minutes ago, but Loki already was in a state where he would give the human everything he would ask for.

His hips moved forward, pressing his still covered erection against the other's palm and Tony growled and let his grip tighten, sending another shiver down Loki's spine and making his blood pumping.

Eventually, the god's hands started to explore as well, going from Tony's head down his back, where they crawled under the fabric of the other's clothing, caressing the small of his back. His nails dug into the skin there, causing Tony to cease his kneading movements on Loki's groin and Loki used the short time-out to shove the pullover upwards, forcing it entirely off the other's body in one movement.

Without the clothing, the light of the reactor was much more vibrant, but Loki could not muster the same amount of interest he had during their first time together. This time, the device was ignored for much better parts of Tony's body, like the skin on the hia abdomen, the strong muscles showing beneath and a the thin trail of dark hair that lead from the navel down into the pants – pants that needed to be removed.

Meanwhile, Tony opened the zipper of Loki's jeans, trying to get them off and to expose as much skin as possible. Again, removing the unpleasant clothing meant to break contact between their bodies, so both did their best to be quick.

When his erection was finally freed from his pants, Loki could not hold back a low moan.

A second later, a firm hand closed around his cock, stroking it a few times and Loki was not able to do more than meet the movement, trying to get as much of the delicious friction as possible. He was already leaking and Tony's thumb moved over the wet tip to spread the clear liquid over his entire length, making the movements slippery and any last restraints falter. It was impossible to hold back a moan, but there was no need to. Even though, Tony had never mentioned it, Loki knew that he loved every little noise he made. He had felt the reaction, the nails digging deeper into his skin, the stuttering breath.

Anyway: here, at the end of the world, no one could hear them.

He knew that Tony was savoring every little twist in his features, how his lips parted in soft moans every time he moved his thumb over the tip of his cock, although Loki's green eyes had eventually fluttered shut during the process, giving himself entirely to the human.
Tony's hand was all slick and wet, easily pumping the god's shaft with his fist now and Loki's hips jerked involuntarily when the urge to move became too strong.

Opening his eyes again, he caught Tony's excited gaze and their eyes met. The god knew that the mortal had to be practically dying with his growing erection still held back by the bulging fabric, yet it was obvious he would not rush this like the last time.

The feeling was mutual.

Slowly, Tony's fingers kept caressing his length, sometimes drifting down to play with his balls, squeezing them tight before he released them again, causing Loki to mutter a curse when he could not take it any longer.

“Fuck, Tony, enough of this...!”

A grin spread over the other's features at this most gentle of compliments, but in the next moment he already had hands on his chest, pushing him over before he could complain.

Tony's back met the carpet, while Loki was still straddling him, holding him on the floor. For a second, Tony's face was a display of surprise, but when he looked up to Loki again, he willingly got used to the change of positions.

Knees on both sides of Tony's hips, his flushed erection standing proud, glistening wetly in the light of Tony's reactor, Loki knew he was a feast for the eyes. Despite his messy hair and the dark circles under his eyes, he still had an aura he was aware of and the mortal's gaze was confirmation enough.

Their first time had been so heated and out of affect that he had not had enough patience to look properly at the other's body, but now he took his time to perceive everything which was so deliciously laid out beneath him.

Strong muscles, clearly visible under the skin due to the slight malnourishment, the fading scars under the collarbone and on his abdomen where Tony had removed the tracker, and then, further down, the bulge in Tony's jeans. A hungry smile spread over Loki's features.

Carefully, almost teasingly slow, he opened the zipper and his nimble hands disappeared under the waistband to remove the restricting piece of clothing. Contrary to himself, Tony still had his underwear left - although, in their situation right now, it was more of a disadvantage.

The fabric was straining over Tony's now clearly visible erection - and Loki had not even touched him yet.

This however, he would change now.

Ignoring his own need for a while, one of his hands went down to the other's cock, letting his fingers slide over it first, before he started to knead the hard flesh through the fabric of his shorts. All the time, he watched the other's face, while his other hand was resting on the human's chest, applying a slight pressure. Not that Tony would try to deliberately remove himself from his position under Loki right now.

The moment he had touched him, Tony made a deep, drawn-out groan and Loki did not really want to think about what noises he would make if he would do what had already enticed him during their last time.

Smaller kisses on Tony's lower abdomen silenced him for just a moment, yet, when he realized his intentions, Loki felt his muscles suddenly tense with anticipation. Slightly grinning still, the rubbing movements of his hand grew faster and more intense, causing more, louder moans, until, all of sudden, he stopped entirely.
His head resting against the other's body, the god's hairs trailed over the sensitive skin there. Barely inches away from his still covered cock, Loki gazed up at Tony, the devious smirk never leaving his face.

Tentatively, his tongue flicked over the bare skin just over the waistband and the entire body beneath him shuddered. Then, Loki showed mercy and the last bit of clothing was removed.

Tony's cock was already fully erect, reddened and with a wet glistening tip. Moistening his lips with his tongue, Loki enjoyed the sight for a second, then his hand reached around the base, giving it a slight squeeze that rewarded him with a twitching movement of Tony's legs.

Without another second of hesitation, his head dipped down and he took the tip in his mouth, firstly, sucking and licking it only slowly. Hands found their way in his hair and Loki took the compliment, letting his tongue swirl around the sensitive tip, pressing into the slit on top to taste the salty precum and against the sensitive underside.

Although he was not the one at the receiving end, he felt his own erection pulsing with desire at the sounds he received from the human. What noises he could make the other utter with nothing but the work of his tongue: soft pants, deep throaty groans, and even a half muffled whimper when he swallowed the entire length.

Loki felt the tip pressing against the back of his throat, a feeling he had not felt a long time, but for him, it was far from being a problem.

Slowly at first, he started to bob his head up and down, swallowing deep every time. His nose brushed over the hair at the base, but Loki kept sucking in Tony's entire length, feeling it slide in and out of his throat every time he moved his head.

When Loki eventually removed himself, his lips caused a wet, smacking noise as the other's cock slid out of his mouth, leaving a trickle of saliva on his lips and chin. Loki looked up to meet Tony's eyes again, who had sat up the moment he had moved away. The mortal removed his hand from his hair where he had held him and reached down to wipe the fluid away with his thumb.

He looked flushed, breathless, but the hunger in his eyes had not been stilled yet and when he closed the distance between them again, an almost obscene grin was plaing in the corners of his mouth.

He wanted to have everything from Loki - and Loki would give him everything.

It always was a game of pretended dominance between them, this time it was Tony who took the offensive. Their kissing, intense and breathless, yet now without the biting and the aggression of unresolved tension, was led by Tony this time, who eventually moved himself on top of Loki, pushing him down to lie prone.

The mortal's hands were stroking along his sides, over his arms, buttocks and the inside of his thighs, as if to remember every inch of his skin. Loki shuddered when he felt hot breath in his nape, then a slight graze of teeth over pale skin.

With a satisfied smile, he closed his eyes and a low purring sound escaped him when Tony started to kiss along his nape and nuzzled into his hair. The tender and careful touches were beautiful, but what was really exciting was the filthy feeling of the other's hard erection pressing against the inside of his thighs, leaving a wet sensation.

Eventually, Loki felt how one of Tony's hands followed down the trail of his spine, stopping mere inches away from its aim and Loki was once again holding his breath, spreading his legs just the slightest bit. Yet then, the fingers traveled back up and three of them were shoved between his lips.

Willingly, Loki opened his mouth, letting his tongue swirl around the fingers, sucking them in just like he had done it with Tony's cock before. When Tony pulled them back, they were glistening with saliva.
The god licked his lips, then threw a challenging look at the mortal behind him, only waiting for him to move on. Soon, Tony's hand disappeared out of Loki's view again, then he felt them again, a warm, wet sensation at his entrance, pushing inside with more caution than it would have been necessary.

For a second, he pressed his lips together, but then relaxed easily. The feeling of two fingers inside of him – pleasant but far from being enough - made him impatient. Yes, he might be greedy, but he could not be satisfied with only a percentage of the pleasure he knew would follow.

Even though Tony knew what he was doing, he really knew. With every movement, he sent a rush of pleasure through his entire body, stimulating the sensitive area with a patience Loki was not able to muster any longer.

His hips pushed back against Tony when a third finger entered him and Loki growled, loud and demanding. He wanted more, wanted to feel Tony's entire length inside of him, not only the teasing touch of his fingers, but he was no desperate enough to ask for it.

Not yet.

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Achingly slow, Tony let his fingers slide in and out, burying them up to the last knuckle every time before he withdrew again. He knew it was by far not enough for Loki, that he was as greedy as Tony was, but he wanted him to burn a little longer before he gave him what they both desired.

Because one thing he had learned from the last time, this blurry memory of bodies clashing together, of heated skin and slippery love-making after months of deprivation – the longer you had to wait, the more intense your body felt.

He had never considered himself the type for any kind of ascesis, but here, with Loki, it was like every touch burned itself beneath his skin, like his nerves were lit on fire every time the god did as much as let his fingers trail over his back.

Perhaps it was not deprivation at all. Perhaps, it was just Loki.

Lifting his hips from the carpet a little, the god pushed back against him, the intent of his gesture positioned somewhere between a plead and a demand. Tony could not see his face any more, it was buried in his arms, his hair falling down at its sides, but he could imagine his expression well enough for his cock to twitch in anticipation.

Adding a third finger was easy, nevertheless it lured a breathed sigh out of the other and Tony went on, scissoring and pushing as deep as he got, teasing the sensitive hole with every movement he made. The inventor had sat back on his haunches to have better control, and now let his left hand slide beneath Loki's hip, heaving him onto his knees.

Forearms still on the carpet with his head resting upon them, Loki bent his back to meet Tony's silent order, his ass up in the air, exposed and for him to take what he wanted.

It was hot, filthy in the best kind, and for a second, Tony could not believe what a fucking asshole fortune was for making him lose everything so that he would eventually find the kind of dirty sexy bastard he had not found in hundreds of beds.

A stupid thought, its origin probably located in his throbbing, painfully hard erection other than in the evolutionary later developed parts of his brain, but it was just sadly true that the chemistry between them was something Tony had not come across more than twice in his lifetime.
Reaching further around, the engineer closed his fingers on Loki's erection, in one movement taking hold of the heated, hard flesh in a firm grip and pushing all three fingers deep inside. A jolt went through the other's body and Tony grinned, licking his dry lips before, for one moment only, a glimpse of that teasing bastard he usually loved to play in bed shone through.

“Growing impatient, aren't we?”

“You- haa...!”

The god did not answer properly, nor did he really have the time for it as Tony went on. Setting both hands in the same rhythm, Loki was caught in between, torn between pushing back against his fingers and thrusting forward in his hand. Slow at first, but then faster, he made the god squirm, small, jerky noises coming from his mouth, muffled by his arms, now and then interrupted by louder gasps. Tony could feel that the other was on the verge of orgasm, he knew he could make him come like that if he wanted to – and fuck, how he wanted to! - but there was something he wanted even more.

When he felt the other's breath stutter Tony eventually stopped, earning him a muffled noise of displeasure from the god. He withdrew with as much caution as he was able to keep up, his fingers slick with precum and saliva.

As soon as his hands left as a support, Loki sank down on the carpet again, temporarily not able or willing to muster the necessary strength in his legs.

Spitting in his right, Tony just needed a few seconds to wet his erection. His hand still on his dick, he caught Loki's gaze, a bright glistening in his eyes clouded with want, and both men shared a faint, breathy grin.

Letting his hips roll invitingly, the god gave a little show of rubbing himself off on the carpet, but the time for games and teases were over now.

His hands running up on Loki's thighs, Tony spread his firm cheeks, positioning the tip of his cock at his entrance, already pressing against the tight hole. Then, in a long, deep thrust, he pushed into the god. For a moment, he closed his eyes and his breath stopped as he was engulfed by this oh so sweet heat and beneath him, he felt Loki tense as well. This time, from nothing but pleasure.

Something similarly intelligent as “Oh my.. fuck..” escaped Tony's lips when he opened his eyes to look down, his gaze following his movements as he slowly withdrew half the way again, feeling every inch of it.

Thrusting back into Loki, the god's body felt like it was sucking him in, clenching around him in a way that made his head dizzy. He pushed into him another time, then lowered himself onto his elbows, unable to withstand the urge to get closer.

Loki uttered a throaty gasp at the changed angle, and Tony thrust into him again, harder and more precise, and this time, Loki moaned. Keeping their position, the inventor started a slow rhythm, sensual at first, to savor the feeling of closeness as long as it did not become unbearable. His thrusts were penetrating deep and intensely, pressing the body beneath him into the ground with his body-weight. Where his hot breath met the skin of Loki's neck, he placed a few, gentle kisses, exactly the spot where he had once placed a long, thick needle.

Yet, this Loki was his, his alone and when he felt the other's body like this, he knew that no force in the universe other than certain death could ever tear apart what they had now.

Fuck, it really was astonishing how intimate and at the same time so downright filthy their doing
Intimate in the way he covered Loki, with no inch left between them so that the heat between their bodies increased with every passing second, the way he kissed the back of Loki's neck and how the trickster responded to every touch, melting into him like it was the best feeling in the world.

Filthy because of the smacking noise every time their bodies met, the hot, wet feeling inside of Loki, how he moaned, almost screamed every time Tony thrust into him deeply, not bothering about anything anymore. Pushing the other into the carpet with every move, he started to fasten his pace, trying to intensify that feeling, trying to wipe his head free of everything else.

Loki already clawed his hands at the carpet beneath, trying to hold onto it, but his sharp nails were ripping open the old fabric, while his entire body rubbed against the ground in a desperate attempt to create more friction. The god had already been close to the peak when Tony had entered him, and he knew the other would not last long, not at the pace he was holding. But he would not hold back now, he was already close himself, his unrestrained moans only muffled by Loki's hair.

They were silent, though, all words failing them, who usually were so deft with words, now, when animal lust took over. What remained were breathless panting and stifled groans, telling more than words could.

Tony's movements grew more erratic and jerky, and, without noticing it, his nails dug into Loki's side, probably hard enough to draw blood had he been mortal. Another trust, then another – his movements lost control, turned into an automatism. For a few moments, all thoughts were wiped out of his mind, every coherent word. There was only the warm skin pressed against his, the delicious smell of another being and the sensation inside of Loki, filling him completely.

For that split-second orgasm overwhelmed him, everything was perfect. Loki was perfect, was entirely his, and nothing else in the world mattered anymore. It did not matter that there was a war going on outside, that the worlds were at the verge of destruction, that they were on a dirty carpet in a flooded, abandoned cellar.

With a harsh bite in the salty skin on Loki's nape, Tony silenced his guttural moan when he released himself inside of him and Loki came a moment later, his back aching, head thrown back, Tony's name on his lips while he was riding him through orgasm.

Tensed muscles eased again and exhaustion started to set in, ending that beautiful moment of perfection much too soon. Even though orgasm started to fade out, Tony held perfectly still - he did not dare to destroy the moment. His whole body heavy with a sudden fatigue, he remained on top of Loki, his chest weighing on the other's back so that he could feel his own heartbeat thrumming against the warm body beneath. With closed eyes, his head rested in the hollow of Loki's nape, inhaling the god's scent like it was medicine.

Their bodies somehow were made for a perfect fit, something which one would not think at the first look, given the height differences and all, but Tony would have no problems falling asleep like this. In fact, he actually had to fight sleep right now. Falling asleep while feeling Loki's body against his own gave him a security he had thought lost with Pepper's death. Not that he had ever told the god, but after their first night together, his nightmares had stopped almost completely - something neither therapy nor medication had yet...
achieved.

Yet, after some time, when the thin layer of sweat cooled down his body, he realized that they were still in an ugly old cellar with moist walls and dripping pipes and that he had to move.

“The day will come when we will have sex somewhere with white satin sheets and fluffy pillows - which we won't need, because it will be warm enough to sleep naked, sprawled all over the bed...”

Tony smiled a dreamy smile, then placed a last kiss at the base of the god's skull, before he sat up and separated their bodies. Now completely exposed to the cold air around, he shivered and was automatically drawn to the silent fireplace.

“Making plans for the future...?”

Loki had sat up as well, his whole body speaking that language of sexual satisfaction with lazy, slow movements. Yet, his voice was surprisingly clear and his eyes glistened with interest, the glow of the fire lightening the bright iris.

Tony felt caught, although he did not see the reason why.

He looked over to Loki with a thoughtful expression, trying to find in the other's eyes what he thought about this distant word 'future', but he did not find an answer. Instead, he cracked a grin, unable to find a decent answer. One hand rubbing over his stubbly chin, he averted his gaze and looked into the fire, before he eventually started to dress again.

Loki watched how Tony put on his clothing again, probably too tired and satisfied to complain about the withdrawal of contact, or to redress himself. It was unfair, but it was only Tony who needed his clothing to stay warm at night - Loki did not need anything to keep his temperature steady.

He had abandoned all thoughts of showering for the time being, but right now, he really felt like it. Yet, he had to cope with the conditions as they were, meaning shit, and so, he had to get dressed just like this. When he eventually was fully dressed again, even the scarf included, he turned back to the god, rising an eyebrow when he saw that Loki was still naked, lying there with his legs casually spread and a smirk on his face.

His gaze wandered over the exposed skin, stopping on Loki's softening erection and the long legs for a moment, but then he focused back on his face.

“I always struggle to decide whether you are just too lazy to get dressed again, or if you can't get enough of me.”

“Why don't you just come over here?”, Loki responded with a teasing tone in his voice and rolled onto his side to make more room for Tony. Then, he waited.

Well, that surely was an invitation you did not reject.

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They did not have something like an usual position, but most times it was Loki who held Tony, due to the height difference, but also, to keep his mortal body save during the night and ensure that he was warm enough. Throughout some hours, though, it was Tony who took this position, filling Loki with a warmth and feeling of safety not even magic could induce.

It was the same now, with the other's hands slung around his waist from behind, drawing small,
lazy patterns on his chest and abdomen, the feeling of Tony's nose nuzzled into his hair.

The magic fire eventually burned down, leaving the room in a faint, warm glow, just enough light to make out silhouettes in the dark. Loki laid still and listened to the sound of Tony's breath slowing down, smiling at the other's body's sudden twitches, until his breath turned deep and quiet and his body became limp, implicating that he had fallen asleep.

When he was absolutely sure that the mortal was sleeping, Loki closed his eyes as well and tried to fall asleep himself. It should have been easy, a soft drifting into sweet unconsciousness with his body so pleasantly tired and his mind at ease.
Still, he could not bring himself to relax. There was a feeling making his ribcage feel too tight, a feeling that something was not quite alright and it did not cease, no matter how much he tried to calm himself down.
If he only knew its origin... but he did not, and all he could do was scold himself for stupidity.

Then, he noticed it.

 Barely sensible at first, it became distinguishable when he focused his attention on it: a slight stinging on the underside of his right arm, close to the pulse. It felt strange, like a wound or a deep slice in his flesh - as if somebody had cut him with with a hot knife.

He tried to reflect the cause of the day and go back to the exact point where he had felt it the first time, but the only conclusion coming into his mind made no sense. The sensation had been there for several hours now, almost the entire day, but had remained a dull pain in the back of his mind.
If he thought about it, it had been there since... since his fight against Tony.

In the darkness, Loki frowned to himself. He had healed all wounds, there had no damage been left to his body!
Every single cell had been repaired, even where the repulsor had hit him on the head and left a huge scorch-mark.

There was something wrong. A faint rising of angst tried to take over Loki's consciousness, but he had to see for himself first.

Slowly, Loki pulled his right arm closer and looked at the limb. Even in the dark, he saw now difference to what it usually looked: lean muscle and pale, unmarred skin. He turned it, revealing the more sensitive downside of his lower arm, just to be sure.
At first, he noticed nothing odd. No change in color or texture that might have implied a wound or an infection under the skin was to be found, but then, he noticed the thin barely visible slash in his skin.

This was strange, something he had not seen before.

With his other hand he reached out to touch the unusual mark, let the tip of his index finger run over the cut. His skin felt normal, so he implied a small amount of pressure and pushed his finger against the wound.

Blue-white pain exploded in his arm, burning through flesh and bones, dying down immediately after he withdrew his finger.

Tears filled his eyes in his attempt to keep his mouth shut, his lips pressed together to suppress any cry or whimper. He did not want to wake Tony, he did not need to see... this. It was not the pain of a simple cut, but the same scorching agony he had felt when the Tesseract's energy had burned him from the inside out. This time, it was restricted to his arm, but painful to the point of agony
nevertheless.

When Loki had his heartbeat under control again, he looked at the wound another time. The change was shocking: what had only been a thin cut before had burst open into a gaping wound. Still, it was relatively small, but...

No, it was unmistakeable. There was neither the red color of hurt flesh and cut veins, nor the faint yellow of sinews and tissue one might expect to find, but a blue glow that engulfed the structures inside.

When he raised his arm slightly, a searing hot droplet of a bright blue liquid ran out of the wound, causing him to hiss between clenched teeth.

Apparently, everything had its price.

Loki had heard of wounds like this. He had read of sorcerers who had absorbed too much energy in their body, enhanced through magical artifacts, until it had become too much for their physical shells to hold.

Yet, never had he expected something like that would ever happen to him. What a childish thought, nothing but hubris, in hindsight. What had he expected when he had allowed the unlimited power of the Tesseract into his body?

And still, he could not entirely believe it, was simply unable to grasp the full meaning of the changed circumstances.

Pain, a slow dissolving of his body, sped up through the use of magic – the energy did not belong inside of him and consequently, it would burn its way outside, destroying everything in its path. Strangely, Loki did not feel any remorse, although he had probably sentenced himself to death through his actions.

It had been a necessary task, otherwise he would have never gained the power that would enable him to defeat the Chitauri... and to kill Thanos.

Because, no matter what the situation looked like right now, with no aliens around to kill - Loki knew he would never escape this confrontation. He had known since his defeat in Midgard that he would have to kill Thanos – or he would kill him.

Behind his back, Tony let out a deep sigh in his sleep. Loki's heart sank.

He could not let the human know what was happening, under no circumstances. Loki knew what his reaction would look like and he remembered the promise he had given on this very evening. Tony's mind and hands had been what had enabled him the access to these powers - when he would realize that this power was destroying Loki now, he would find a way to take it away from him as well.

Loki watched the the wound disappeared with a last flicker when he cast an illusion to cover it, making the skin appear as perfect and normal as before. Of course, using magic to cover up a magic wound was more than counter-productive, but in the end, it only needed to last temporarily.

Until he had done what had been his task all along.

With that thought in mind, Loki tried to relax again, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but somehow, sleep did not come to him this night.
Wow, another monster chapter o_o

Sorry to destroy all the Frostiron-Love again, but let's be honest, who didn't anticipate that the whole Tesseract thing might not work out that well for Loki? :)

Also, we would really enjoy it if you would comment, even if it's only a very short one. Due to the slight lack of review lately, we have the feeling that not many people are interested in this story anymore...
For everyone who has commented so far, and some of you even multiple times...you are awesome <3
India had always been a noisy country.

Since had first set a foot on Indian ground, he had been overwhelmed by noise and motion, by dirt and heat, sometimes too dry, most often too moist. He had become used to the noise, it seemed to soothe him on a level nobody had yet quite understood, including himself.

Somehow, the noise was so overwhelming, the motions and movements so erratic, that it all mixed into a blur of colors and shouts and car honks – a blur he could easily blend into. Even the wildest of waters became quiet if you just dived deep enough into its depths, away from the raging surface.

Now, the waves were raging again, so to speak, throwing him from one side to the other.

Bruce concentrated on breathing.

Even though he tried to keep his eyes to the ground, it was impossible not to notice his surroundings.

The airport in Mumbai was crowded, nearly bursting with people. They were everywhere, standing so close you could smell their breath, smell the sweat and the dirt and the desperation. From all directions, elbows nudged his side, small children bumped into his legs, sometimes hands grabbed for the fabric of his pants.

Bruce tried to get through them without stepping on anybody's feet or pushing somebody away, yet it was useless to be kind now - now, when people forgot kindness to save their lives.

A bit lost, the scientist looked around for any sign of orientation, squinting his eyes to be able to read the far away letters.

There was not a lot to read anyway, with or without his glasses. The great display was somehow not up to date any longer, showing nothing but incoming flights from five days ago. Airport staff was nowhere to be seen and the only people looking official around here were police and military men.

The scenery was apocalyptic.

There were old people, some of them supported by family members, some of them alone, hunkered on the floor, forgotten, begging for something nobody could offer. Then, families: women in dirty Saris, clad in traditional clothes, having fled the rural areas, because even there, you were not safe any longer. Their men were shouting for attention, boxing their way through the masses, trying to save their beloved ones from the only things this country had to offer nowadays: starvation, contamination, homicide, diseases and aliens.

Most of the people did not even have luggage and if they had, it was barely more than a sole bag – faced with the choice of either death or emigration, people tended to remember the things most important to them.

Also, they tended to become violent. Bruce could sense the potential for aggression in the air and he could breath deeply as much as he wanted – the Other Guy rumored inside of him, erecting the
hairs on his neck and making him clench his jaw. He was nervous nowadays, easy to stir and hard to suppress, and he had not been able to practice his yoga sessions properly during the last two weeks.

Along his way, the doctor had already seen numerous fights, although he had barely managed to protrude further into the airport hall than fifty feet.

However, what got to Bruce most were the children.

Not one of them was playing, most of them just tried to stay as close to their parents as possible. Their big, dark eyes were peeking from behind their mother's legs, and in some of them, he saw the shadow of things no child should ever see.

Some children were completely alone, a lot of street kids, yet probably a lot more of them just recently orphaned. They were running through the crowds in groups or on their own, trying to get the adults to listen to their “Mister, mister!”, their small voices drowned by crying babies, yelling men and the airport-announcements.

“Dear customers. This is an emergency situation. Please remain calm and form queues in an orderly fashion, so that you can proceed to the counter as quickly as possible. If you have not booked a flight yet, please refer to counter 1 – 37. If you have already booked a flight, please refer to counter 38 – 40. Thank you for your understanding. We assure you the best possible service.”

It did not help to repeat it every 2 minutes – you could not fool people any longer.

Rumor had spread that there were not enough planes and now, it felt like every single one of the millions upon millions inhabitants – or what was left of them - of Mumbai were trying to squeeze themselves in the few ones remaining.

People knew that the times to queue orderly were over. If they had not been over already when the Chitauri had started to attack, they certainly were in the weeks after. If one looked around in the airport, the snack shops and book stores were closed, which had not prevented people to break the windows and raid them.

The whole announcement was nothing but a cruel joke, every sentence of it a lie. There was nothing left of what one would call 'service' – except if you were one of the few chosen ones to queue in front of counter 38 – 40.

Several security men, men who were somehow lacking in numbers in the other areas of the airport, shielded the most wanted three counters from the incoming masses. It was a hard piece of work, requiring equipment Bruce had rarely seen anywhere else than at the sights of revolutions or demonstrations before.

The guns clearly said that nobody came past that magical line, but people begged anyway.

Their heart-tearing crying was as useless as it was to grab the security men and try to somehow force your way through their lines. It only earned them insults and pushes and hits with the baton. The stress in the security men's eyes was visible, sweat was running down their foreheads and they surely felt like dying underneath their uniform.

They had to do a nasty job, denying their own people access to the few available planes. Bruce pitied them, pitied them in the same way as it made him furious to see what kind of people were protected by their force.

People who waited for their flights here had been either intelligent or pessimistic enough to book them in advance, or, judging from the different choice of clothing you found in the entire group (if you could call it a choice), they simply happened to have the money.

The men and women here had significantly less children with them, yet more luggage as what seemed to Bruce as a sort of compensation. The amount of dark skin and hair differed as well and,
with a painful sting in his heart, he added a fourth category: you had to be a foreigner.

With as much caution as possible, he finally managed to squeeze through numerous shoulders and elbows and backpacks and reached the first row in front of the barrier, just to be stopped again.

“Sir, no trespassing! Please use one of the other counters!”

The security guy was shouting against the storm of pleads and cries and airport-announcements, but Bruce understood him anyway. It was probably the only thing the man said during the entire day.

“I have a flight booked! I'm an American citizen!”

He had been holding his passport in his hand the entire time – you were barely able to move in this crowd and if you owned something valuable, you had to keep it close to your person. In these days, exactly 10 days after the government had announced national emergency, an American passport held more value than a paid estate.

There was a mistrustful glare in the other man's eyes, yet after a quick look at the photo and the PhD in front of his name, Bruce was permitted access to the other side of the magical line.

Immediately, the volume of the people's cries and pleads increased, as it did every time somebody was allowed to enter.

It felt like entering the queue to the gates of paradise after marching through purgatory: everybody knew that you were safe after you walked through the giant golden gate – and everybody knew that what was awaiting you behind the walls of the airport was hell.

Bruce felt sick.

Sick and angry that even now, facing the country's bloodiest tragedy – and India had by far not been spared by bloody tragedies until now – it was still your race, your status, your name that ensured your survival.

Instead of learning from the past and working together, it was still the government and the high caste of economy's most wanted who had left first, leaving their country in chaos.

Bruce had tried to stay as long as possible. He had treated the wounded and sick which were filling the clinics and hospitals up to the roof. Counting how many open fractures, infected wounds – often contaminated by alien viruses - and third degree burns he had treated during the last five days was impossible and the sheer extent of all the misery behind this was not even comprehensible any longer.

There had not been a trace of doubt within him to return to India after the great tragedy in New York. People had been dying everywhere over the globe, they still were dying like flies, and it had always failed to get into his head why his help should be needed more in a land capable of arranging the best doctors of the world anyway.

There were not a lot of doctor's here and there were even less in the countryside, so it had been only logical to come here.

Well, that at least was the version he would tell everybody who did not know him.

Pepper's death had played a significant part in his decision making as well. Not only, because she had been a more than just a nice person, warm and gentle and resolute in the same way, but because of what it had done to Tony and, in extension, to their team.

When the Iron Man had retreated from his job and, in all public, hit rock bottom so hard that nobody had been quick enough to cushion the impact, Bruce had started to question his loyalty.
Thor had been gone long before, breaking a huge hole in their small group of extraordinary people, a hole nobody could fill completely. Steve tried, he really tried his best, even more than Bruce had anybody else ever seen trying, but it was not enough. All his speeches, all the motivation and the moral support he provided as their leader, it was just not the same - and everybody knew.

Additionally, he had never trusted SHIELD, in times of crisis even less than usually. Even though he had grown fond of their team and liked both of the two assassins, he knew from whom they received their orders.

No, he had not needed to ponder his decision.

There had just been nothing to do for him in the United States any longer: His one, true friend so obviously choosing death and solitude, he had not dared to intrude his private hell of grief and guilt. He knew that Steve tried, and from overhearing the Captain's end of the line, he knew how those calls had ended. Their team, nothing more than a bad joke of what they had once been, not capable of stopping the Chitauri and, in the end, replaced by a nuke. The bitter part of himself had thought that the bomb had done nothing else than what the Hulk would have done if he would just let him lose completely – destroy everything in the way, no matter whether it was friend or enemy.

Bruce had been tired of killing, even though for him, it was only the bitter aftertaste of murder - second hand homicide.

He had been wanting to do good, before anybody would take advantage of him again. There was just so much frustration he could endure and seeing people die under his hands day after day, with him unable to help, was nothing Bruce had been able to stand any longer. Just because there was this creature inside of him which enjoyed smashing Chitauri skulls more than sowing lethal abdominal wounds...

Knowing fully well that he left behind anarchy and terror, but no message or letter which would explain his absence, he had gotten on a plane one day. The plane had been empty, except for about six other people – nobody left the warzone just because they preferred another one with worse hygiene conditions.

However, death had followed him on the heel and in a matter of months, he had started to envy Sisyphus, because it was only one stone he had to carry, whereas Bruce was buried beneath an avalanche of stones every hour of the day.

Again, people had been dying underneath his hands. Old people, children, women and men and he had hulked out more than a dozen times. Against his will, without his permission, yet the Chitauri never asked for permission when they suddenly appeared and Bruce never remembered what had happened when he awoke days later in a small village in the hills, naked and covered in insect bites.

Now, he was in the capital again, here, in the small secured area which still tried to maintain the image of civilization.

When finally, after what had felt like an hour, he stumbled to the end of counter's 38's queue, he looked like an intruder to this world. With his backpack, his tousled hair and his partly unbuttoned shirt under a plain jacket, he made people stare. It was not necessary to make him feel uncomfortable, he did anyway in the company of people who so obviously knew their place and thought to know the place of others. Straightening his back, he returned the glare of a man in a fascinatingly clean suit, but his gaze automatically traveled back
to the raging crowd behind the barrier.
With a heavy heart, he realized he would abandon people again, although these were people he hardly knew, to claim a privilege he had never done anything for. The only thing he owned which made him fit in the pattern of people here was his American passport.

It was his original one, not one of those he had acquired during his flight from SHIELD all over the world and he knew that they would be able to locate him in a matter of seconds as soon as the woman on the counter had typed in his name.

Yet, it did not matter anymore – he was going to visit them anyway.

Fleeing the misery there, he now returned to it with the same wish he had back then: to help people.

Tony’s unexpected call two months before had been the trigger and had not left his thoughts ever since. For all he had tried and tired, he had not come to the conclusion what on earth it could be that had brought the inventor in a situation which required him to treat an infected Chitauri wound on Loki, God of Mischief and Lies.

It was an enigma to him what had set the god free so that he was back on earth and why Thor was not closely following him - but that was only the beginning of things Bruce did not understand. Why had they teamed up (apparently they had, but the chance for a weird sort of kidnapping remained)? What promise had been big enough to lure Tony out of his mansion? What was Loki’s plan and why was Tony stupid enough not to see through it? Or, perhaps he was not, and was trying to prevent it from happening?

There were close to zero relevant information the scientist had gathered from the strange call, but it had left him with one unpleasant certainty:

Something big was about to happen over there.

In the time which had passed after he had talked to Tony, everything could have happened, but apparently, it had not been enough to make it in the news. Yet, without any further evidence, Bruce was positive that there was something cooking - and when Loki was involved, he knew that SHIELD was, too.

Of course, he had not called Tony back after they had spoken and he was certain that the other would not have answered any of these calls. It started to resemble paranoia, but Bruce knew that Fury would track him down if he had only so much as stretched his hand for the phone. Every soldier was needed in a fight like this, even better though, if the soldier was a giant green monster with the strength of a battalion.

The math he had done for himself while doing his best in the hectically thrown together field-hospital was simple, yet it had took him a lot more time to find a decision than before. Even when you calculated every variable, every potential risk, you always got the same result: a faint glimmer of hope over there - stagnation and millions of death over here.

Bruce needed hope again, be it only from a strange and chaotic phone call in the middle of the night from a friend he had been letting down in the worst phase of his life.

“Next, please.”

The doctor handed the man behind the counter his papers. Despite his knowledge that he had everything necessary, he became nervous again while the other’s eyes ran along the lines of his name and land of birth. If he would not be allowed on board now, he was doomed to stay here.
Of course, it would not result in his death, the Other Guy was far too keen on living to grant him such a kind of relief, but the simple thought of having tried and then be denied was barely thinkable.

“Dr. Banner?”

“Hm, sorry?”

It was not just the overwhelming noise that distracted him, but also his recent lack of sleep. He lost himself in aimless thoughts a lot these days.

“I said you could go. Please use gate 12, your flight is due in half an hour. I wish you all the best.”

“Th-thank you...”

Just when he took back his papers, the volume behind the counter increased again. Attention drawn towards the noise, Bruce turned around together with the other people in the queue. A man, haggard and dirty, was screaming on top of his lungs at one of the security men and Bruce was barely able to understand his words, despite his Hindi skills. It was not necessary anyway, because there was not much to guess about people's intentions here.

The security man yelled back “NO!” every time the other approached him, pushing him back with the force of his baton and the help of his colleague, but as the crowd around saw the chance for turmoil, the aggression spread like wildfire.

All of a sudden, the man jumped at the security man, using him like a ladder to overcome the barrier - then, things escalated.

The man failed to climb over the barrier and fell backwards to the floor, but the signal had been given: With brute force, people started pushing forward now, one giant wave of bodies and arms and grimaces of fear and anger tearing apart the line of security men and forcing their way into the restricted area. Their leader soon disappeared behind and under trampling feet, forgotten in the heat of the moment, sentenced to painful death.

Before the people around Bruce even were able to start running, guns were torn from their holsters and shots echoed through the air.

High-pitched screams emerged from the crowd when the first people went down, hit by bullets from exhausted security men.

Blood splattered on the floor, one man was dead immediately, a woman only shot at her arm, the first started to faint from shock, from heat, from malnutrition.

As quickly as the riot had started, people receded again, aggression turning into panic. A few of them stumbled, fell to the ground and were trampled on by fleeing persons and still, some idiots were shooting, impossible to say whether their bullets hit anything else than the ceiling.

While everybody else was going crazy, Bruce had stood frozen to the spot, hands clenched into fists, unable to avert his gaze from what was happening. Yet, when the crowd thinned out and he saw that there were people on the floor, dying people, his body started to move on his own.

The doctor dashed forward, pushed a few people to the side to reach a young woman on the floor with a heavily bleeding wound in her stomach.

“It's okay, I'm a doctor, I- hey!”

A harsh grip on his upper arm brought him brutally to his feet again and rough voices with a thick Indian accent told him to stay away.
Furiously, Bruce whirled around without even thinking twice, a hard, dangerous glare in his eyes.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!”

His voice, a deep, throaty growl, seemed to have the desired effect on the policeman in front of him, who had immediately removed his hand. There was fear in his widened eyes and people around them were watching, the small circle around the wounded and dead just the slightest bit quieter than the rest of the hall.

Inside of his head, Bruce felt his pulse racing, throbbing loud in his ears and he wanted nothing more than to smash this man's head into the ground. He was so stupid, so blind and here, right in front of them, people were dying.

“Sir, remove yourself from the scene! Go to your plane! Go!”

He could feel him, feel him roaring inside of his head, waiting to be released, just a few seconds from it. Clenching his hands into fists, Bruce tried to focus his already swimming gaze on the floor and tried to stay in the presence, yet it was the moment the man in front of reminded him of his plane that he remembered to concentrate.

He had to find back to himself, otherwise, he could not help anybody.

He breathed again.

“Bring me a first aid kit, these people need medical treatment. I still have time left. Just give me some minutes and-”

“NO! You go to your plane! There is no place here for an American doctor!”

Without Bruce realizing that anybody had given the signal, two strong pairs of arms suddenly grabbed him from behind as two security men attempted to realize the unspoken order. He could neither give a response nor look back at the girl on the floor, everything was too fast.

Behind him, the walls of people were closing in again, viewing the persons on the floor becoming impossible.

What should he do?!

There were people dying over there and he could not just leave them here! He left so many of them, he could not leave them to die on the dirty floor of a crowded airport hall!

Rage flared up within him again, making his muscles tense and his head heat up, giving his struggle a vehemence he never had as a normal man. No, he had to stay calm, he had to stay calm. All of his concentration was absorbed by these thoughts, there was no room left for anything else. Unthinkable what would happen if he lost control here...

In the end, it was not enough - he had decided to fight himself first rather than the two security guys. Bruce was dragged towards the already reestablished barrier, all of his struggling in vain.

When he was released again, he had not the slightest idea how he had been able to cover this distance.

He looked around, unable to orientate in his surroundings at first, unable to know what exactly he had to do now. His pulse was still racing, but he knew the worst was over and he had time again to think.

Behind his back, he could just see the security men leave – too late to run after them.

It was quiet here, he noticed, much quieter than in the great entrance hall and when he turned around another time, he could make out huge windows and behind them, two planes visible in the
background.

A few people sat or stood in front of those windows, staring at him with horror.

They had brought him to the waiting area. There, he saw one of the few remaining stewardesses, these people here were from the group of people who had had the money. He would get his plane like he had originally intended to.

Bruce shook his head, as if to free it from all the noise and the screams still raging inside of it, then he straightened his jacket and ran a hand through his hair.

He could not go back.

A numb feeling spread inside of him as started walking towards the group of people, not meeting any of their looks. Step after step, he left behind the cries and the shouts, the ear-shredding noise of thousand people squeezed into a room, trying to flee death.

He could not go back to them, otherwise he might have changed his mind.

Inside of him, the Other Guy became strangely quiet as well, as if he was knowing something Bruce did not see yet.

With slow movements, somehow deprived of every strength, he sat down on one of the seats, eyes locked to the floor.

The other people around started to ease a bit and, when he looked up after about five minutes, everything he saw left in their faces was the same, post-traumatic stress he had seen so many times before.

As if it needed the silence around them to finally appreciate what it meant to have left the roaring masses behind, the distant growling of their turmoil still audible here.

Bruce leaned back, but could not relax.

He was one of the chosen ones, one of the few who were allowed to enter heaven. Only, that he was the only one who had been there recently, knowing fully well that heaven was just another battlefield.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, a Brucey chapter! I guess the majority forgot about him, but here he is :)
Hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once higher than the sky itself and of a gold brighter than that of the suns, the hall of Hlidskjalf had been Asgard's greatest pride, unmarred by time - the very center of all its power. It had seen great feasts and glorious men and women, all of Asgards kings had been crowned here. Now, it was nothing but a dark shadow if its former glory, a ruin more than anything else.

Yet, its pitiful condition only mirrored the appearance of the remaining city. The city of Asgard was a graveyard, barely reminding that once, it had been inhabited by the most powerful species known to the Nine Realms.

There were still people left, but there were no feasts any longer. The Aesir warriors were injured and crippled, their strong bodies only barely recovering, their noble spirits shaken by what they had had to endure. The women, usually as strong as the men, if not stronger, were mourning. Quietly or in loud crying agony, they mourned for their fallen men, their fathers, their sons and daughters. The children, too, not old enough to comprehend what had happened, had been crying and searching for parents they would never see again. Never he would forget the sight of it, their small faces tainted with ash.

And he was their king, as damaged as the realm itself, a perfect resemblance.

In all of his lifetime, Thor had never thought there would once come a day he would grow tired of fighting. It was unimaginable for his younger self who had thrown himself into every battle with a grim smile on his face, always in for action, always willing to prove himself. Yet, right now, he would have surrendered everything in his possession – Mjolnir even - to stop the suffering. All he wanted was to ban every other possible threat from the Golden Realm forever, so that his people could live a life in peace.

He owed them peace, after so many losses, after a war so devastating that even in a thousand years, their successor would burst into tears of pity for the horrors Asgard had to endure today.

The Golden Realm had never been defenseless, yet it had always been left untouched by war and devastation. While entire worlds had been formed anew around it, Asgard had been cut off from their struggles and their developments, an unreachable and mostly undisputed ruler. So, the situation had been unique in all its features, unforeseeable even for Heimdalls wise eyes.

Yes, they were always prepared to fight, but no training, no army and no magic could have prepared them for something like this.

Unrelentingly, like a buzzing swarm of insects, the Chitauri had come from the sky without warning or a sign of their approach. A whole army of them, equipped with strange, unknown weaponry and riding beasts from the filthiest corners of the universe, had come from the sky and had been all over the city within minutes. Their attack had been quick and without mercy, ravening upon the unprepared, slaughtering and stealing without shame or honor.

Of course, the people had not let themselves be conquered by nasty, uncultured creatures like the Chitauri. They were Asgardians, after all, and they had fought without fear. They would have fought until the last of them had fallen, there was no doubt in that, and Thor could felt infinitely
grateful for their unbroken support.

However, even that had barely been enough and in the end, even Thor had paid his price.

His right leg was stiff and almost impossible to be lifted, after it had nearly been chopped off by a Chitauri blade during the attack. The Chitauri soldier had not been able to celebrate his triumphal hit, since Mjolnir had smashed his head into mash a second later. Still, the blade had stuck in Thor's muscle and bone, the pain so agonizing that everybody in his proximity had turned their head at his outcry. He could count himself lucky, though, since he had been one of the few who had been able to avoid an infection. Others had not shared this luck.

Usually, Asgardians could not fall ill. It was a common fact, it was taught the children in young years and known as one of the features which distinguished them from other races. When the Chitauri had appeared, they had not only brought war and destruction, but an entirely knew disease. Many warriors had died from it, even if they had only minor wounds. Weeks after the battle, the second wave of destruction had rushed upon them, when they had not been able to dam the spreading infection and the proud Aesir had to acknowledge to themselves that there were things in the universe there was a disease able to kill a god.

Only few had been saved by the healers, awaking weeks later from their comatose fever only to find their beloved ones killed and their city a heap of ruins.

It was hard for Thor to forget the pained screams and muffled whimpers, the death-pleads coming from the healing houses. They haunted him, seemed to echo from the high halls of the palace every time he was alone. Never before had he witnessed war being so ugly.

As a prince he had always been the winning party of the battle. War had meant flashy armors and exciting battles, a sport, promising nothing but honor and praise. Never he had spent a thought on the bloody aftermath, the suffering, not only of those who had lost, but of all the survivors – injured and crippled for life.

It had been kept away from him and he had been too blinded by his own arrogance to see.

As cruel as it sounded, the suffering of Asgard's people was only one of many catastrophes that had come upon them - there was one that shadowed the others with its severity.

Along with the lives of his comrades, the beasts had stolen something from the weapons vault: the Tesseract. It hurt him to say or even think it, but Thor knew that this loss was the worst of all.

To him personally, the Tesseract did not hold much worth and he would have gladly given it away in exchange for the lives of those who had fallen. Yet he knew, that if the Chitauri were in its possession meant that they were doomed. They had been searching the entire universe for the cube and whatever it was they were planning to do with it, the consequence always remained the same: Asgard was meant to die, with no chance of survival.

The Nine Realms would burn, would be wiped from existance. There would be nothing left, but a dark, empty void. Only death, billions of lost lives...

...and yet, nothing had happened.

A year had passed since the attack. It had been a year full of loss and pain, both physical as in the spirit, but there had to be a sign of the Chitauri.
Although expecting the worst every minute, Thor had started to rebuild what was left of the city. With his own hands and the hands of his fellow people, Asgard started to resurrect, a smaller, less glorious form, the city's image still marked by the sight of ruins. He gathered what was left of the Aesir around him, trying to make them believe in a future he did not believe in himself. They listened to his every word, hanging on his lips when he spoke of renewed glory and revenge for the dead.

Still: when the sky remained empty of alien soldiers and Asgard began to recover, slow but steadily, something akin to hope started to build within his own heart.

This hope was a meek small plant, growing from the ashes of resignation and grief: Maybe, these creatures from the other side of the universe had lost interest in them and longer saw a reason to come here, after they brought the Tesseract in their possession. Of course he knew that, despite its modesty, it was a vain hope: the wars on Midgard were proof that the Chitauri wanted more than a magic cube.

Yet, for the sake of his people and his own mind - for now, the illusion of a labile peace could be kept.

At least, that was, until he the day he was called to Heimdall's rebuilt observatory.

“What is it your far-seeing eyes have discovered, guardian?”

Thor's voice resounded from the golden walls of the spherical construct when he entered. The flight with Mjolnir had not tired him, but his crippled leg still hurt from time to time. Mostly, when he moved too much or put too much weight on it, and so the mighty God of Thunder had to lean against the socket in the middle of the observatory to steady his stand.

The guardian did not answer at first, his gaze still lost somewhere in the distance of space.

“Is it the enemy?”

Heimdall had his back to him, and only slowly he turned around, until his bright eyes were fixed on Thor, and not the universe beyond.

“I'm not sure, my king.”

The guardians voice was a deep rumble, the hint of concern in his tone alarming. He was one of the few who had not been damaged through the attack, although he had killed many. Seldom you saw him in battle and when you did, it was a frightening sight for the enemy. Now, a spark of that grim, dark energy he had shown a year ago when facing the Chitauri, was back in his eyes – but also, something else.

“I don't understand, Heimdall. What is it that you see? Who is it?”

The guardian averted his gaze for a split second and it was enough for Thor to know that he would not like the information that would follow – although he could hardly imagine what could make their current situation worse. Who could be out there to bring them a worse fate than the Chitauri?

“I caught sight of Loki... on Midgard.”

This time, Thor did not even feel the pain in his leg when he made a step forward, his features derailing in utter astonishment.
Loki alive?

Although they had never found a body to prove it, everybody had been sure of his death. He must have been killed during the attack, abducted and slaughtered for his failed attempt at conquering Midgard. The cell had been a mess when Thor had come to look for his brother after the worst had been over – badly wounded or not – only to find it destroyed. There had been Chitauri corpses littering around - Loki would never go down without a fight – but there had also been red blood that definitely belonged to an Asgardian. Thor had never come to doubt the demise of his younger brother, every other possibility just seemed out of question. He had accepted Loki's death, had had to accept it to carry on, because there had not been enough time to mourn and because a part of him, a cynical part, had always calculated his death.

Now, knowing Loki alive - a new array of eventualities opened, one worse than the other.

“Is he with the enemy? Is he plotting something?”

“He is not in the company of the Chitauri, although he is moving towards them. It is only moments ago that I caught sight of him. I informed you immediately, but I'm unsure of his aim yet. Something about him has changed... and he is not alone.”

“Who is with him?”, Thor asked breathlessly, his head spinning from the onrush of new information which came much too quickly to process them.

“It is a mortal. I do not know his name, but he is one of those who aided you once in battle.”

Apparently, something had shown on Thor's face, since Heimdall added with a quick and determined tone:

“From everything I can see, he is following voluntarily.”

Things were making less and less sense with every minute.

Some part of Thor was delighted to hear that Loki was, against all expectations, alive. Despite all of his thoughts, Loki was still his brother, his only brother, and one person he held dearest. In the quiet moments, he had grieved for him, when there had been no one to witness his powerlessness and his discouragement. Yet, there had not been a lot of those moments and Loki’s supposed death had been pushed into the back of Thor's mind at some point, if willingly by himself or by the power of the circumstances was still hard to say.

He could not have allowed himself to waste too much energy in mourning a person he had thought lost once before.

The other part of him, thought, and in this moment he was afraid that it was the greater part of him, was an immediate skepticism and a certainty that this unexpected turn did most likely mean nothing good.

If Loki had managed to escape the Chitauri, reached Midgard and persuaded a mortal – an Avenger! – to follow him, it meant that he had a plan. Usually, Loki's plans involved a lot of chaos and danger for everyone, including himself.

Yet, maybe it meant that the younger god had found a way to get rid of the Chitauri... there was only one way to find out.
His decision came without a second of doubt. Straightening his body, Thor looked Heimdall in the eyes, then past him, in the endless void of the stars.

“I have to leave for Midgard. My mother will reign Asgard during my absence.”

It was hard to tell whether Heimdall's glare was disapproving or not, his furrowed brow could mean anything. Whatever it was, right now, Thor could not be bothered less. Of course, it was dangerous that he - Asgard's strongest warrior - left the Realm, searching again for his wayward brother, leaving the city unprotected.

Still, contrary to Midgard, Asgard had only been attacked once and not been embroiled in a war – the stakes were not that high.
After the sky had stayed clear of attackers for over a year, some had come to the conclusion that they did not have anything to fear - yet. The Chitauri would destroy Midgard first. It was the realm with the most inhabitants and it had dared to insult them by attacking them through the portal, striking directly in their homeworld and causing fatal damage.

Asgard, on the other hand, had only been attacked for one purpose so far – to steal the Tesseract and other artifacts and return their once-ally into their custody.

The Golden Realm would fall after Midgard had fallen, yielding under the unstoppable power of the Tesseract.
If Thor had just one chance to stop that, only a vain glimmer of hope that the God of Chaos himself would have the solution for this problem – of course, he would take this chance.

There was nothing to lose and everything to win.

It did not take long for Thor to prepare for his departure. He put on his new battle armor, since his old one had been severely damaged during the battle. Thor had not wanted it to be remade, but others had insisted. He was their king, after all, and he had to look like one – the people of Asgard needed him to.

Besides the armory and Mjolnir herself, the Thundergod would not carry anything else with him into the other realm. He had not done so during the first time, when he had been sent to retrieve Loki. These few items had been enough and they were enough now to make him feel powerful.

It was not overly difficult to persuade Frigga of his plan after a long, intimate discussion. Her first reaction to his message about Loki's survival had been tears, a much more emotional reaction than what he had been able to show.
Eventually she had complied to Thor's request of taking over Asgard's reign for the time being, accepting her duty with a quiet and steady nobility, although her eyes were still slightly red. She had done so multiple times in the past, and Thor knew she would have the strength to do so again, even after everything that happened.

She would do much more in order to have her second son returned – and for the good of Midgard.

No one, except Heimdall, was present when Thor returned to the observatory. He had not told anyone of his departure, not even the Lady Sif or the Warriors Three, for he was sure that they would insist on accompanying him. Thor had no use for them on Earth, no, he needed them in Asgard, to protect what was left as long as he was gone.

Heimdall's expression was indifferent when Thor took the position in front of the gate and gave him a silent signal. He obeyed his king's demand without a word and stepped forward to place his sword in the right spot, exchanging a last look with Thor.
Then, the old, well-known feeling set in. Colors engulfed him and he was dragged forward with an otherworldly force.

A moment later, he found himself back in Realm of Midgard.

Thor took a look around, a harsh breeze tearing on his cape and hairs. He squinted his eyes, trying to locate himself, but failed. At first, the dry and sandy ground reminded him of New Mexico, but he could tell right away that his location was elsewhere. He could smell the sea and make out the outline of a cityscape in the hazy afternoon sky, heard the distant noise of traffic, could sense the changed position of the stars above and the different structure of the ground beneath.

Was Loki nearby? Contrary to other sensations and new information that were flooding his mind, Thor could not perceive the unique trace of his brother’s magic that he had learned to distinguish everywhere.

No, he was alone.

Thor looked around, but could only see dry desert, the strange, spiky Midgardian plants and a nearby road with a strange looking house – a gas station, Thor remembered from one talk or the other.

Only slowly it dawned him that Heimdall had not dropped him close to Loki’s position. The guardian had not told him about the younger god’s exact stay, but Thor could sense that he was not in proximity. The Thundergod was sure that Heimdall had sent him to this exact place for a purpose, although he was not quite sure yet what to make of the situation.

Before he would jump to conclusions, he had to find out where he was. There was only one way to do that.

Upon approaching, the gas station seemed abandoned to him and when he entered the house, he found the shelves almost entirely empty, the cooling devices in the corner no longer running. He was almost on his way back out again, when he discovered a mortal behind the counter, reading a newspaper.

A small hopeful smile appeared on Thor’s mouth at his first sight of a Midgardian for over a year, but when he came closer, he was ignored at first. The human did not bother to look up from what he was reading – an insult his younger self would not have taken lightly – and only when the god stepped close to the counter and cleared his throat, the other lowered his papers.

Small, gray eyes widened with surprise the man moment he caught sight of the Asgardian, a reaction Thor had grown used to and had always known to ignore.

“Tell me, mortal friend, where am I? What is the name of this city we see at the horizon?”

“Uh, California. Los Angeles... USA.”, the human responded, blinking rapidly and looking slightly disturbed.

Unfortunately, although he seemed to suspect that Thor needed some thorough information, it was not enough for him to pinpoint his exact position on Midgard. He did not know the name of the city the man was speaking of, so maybe, a different approach was needed.

“What is the name of the nearby sea? Is it the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean?””, Thor asked, remembering the names of the great Midgardian oceans he had once learned from a map, back in
New Mexico.
Back together with... Jane. Another different story entirely, another person he ought to have thought about more often. He knew that she was alive and well and for the time being, this thought had been all he had allowed himself to think.
So many other things that had needed to be done, so many other things he still needed to do.

“Pacific, I think.”

As soon as the man answered, his thoughts were back on his current mission. Pacific - that meant that he was at the other side of the country, at the continent's western end. Miles away from New York and New Mexico, miles from any part of the country he knew.
He sighed, then looked back at the man behind the counter, who was still staring at him, now his shock had changed to suspicion.

“Thank you. Farewell.”

A firm nod, then he left the store, once again at a loss of where to go. Of course, the nearby city was the choice not far too seek, but what to look for there? He did not know what he would find and he certainly knew that what he was looking for was nothing you simply asked a stranger about.

Still, Heimdall definitely had a reason to send him to exactly this place, he always had.

Just when Thor had walked exactly five steps towards the city in the distance, he sensed a vibration in the air and halted, raising his head to look.
Only faintly at first, but increasing with each second, the vibration became louder, until the air was filled with the infernal roar of a Helicopter.

A grin played in the corner's of his mouth while he watched the heavy machine descend in front of him, yet it was not a depiction of happiness or feelings of familiarity. Of course, how could he have forgotten...
Surely, the organization of SHIELD would notice his return to Midgard immediately and come to pick him up.
Frankly, it was aversion Thor felt at the first sight of the black machine hovering above. Too many bad connotations were associated with that name and in this moment, he could not need anybody to meddle in his business.
Yet, after a moment of thought, he came to the conclusion that this also meant a chance. Who other than SHIELD could tell him what had happened? They would bring him to meet the Avengers... and help to find out which one of them had left with Loki.

Maybe, despite their different intentions, they even knew where to find him.

Eventually, the helicopter touched the ground in a whirl of desert sand and Thor had to squint his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, he saw the door sliding open, revealing the first familiar mortal face for over a year, although, just because of its familiarity, it disturbed him.

Coulson, the man Thor had thought to be killed in a battle long ago, left the helicopter with an agile jump, straightening his suit jacket by tugging on it before he looked up to welcome the baffled God of Thunder.

“ Took you long enough.”
Oh wow, now we have all of them covered. From everything I have heard in this fandom the most of you probably don't feel that sorry for Asgard :P
Also, this time we have a good reason for the slow update: Exams. But soon will be semester break, and who knows, maybe we'll be able to get up to two updates a week again.

And it seems to be some kind of thing in this fic to traumatize people working in gas stations xD
Saying that he was ashamed would have been a nice way to put it. Ready to be swallowed up by the ground and never see the sunlight again, that was more like it.

With all modesty, Clint could say from himself that he was one of SHIELD's best agents. He had accomplished missions most would never dream about and his skill with bow and arrow was legendary - he was the best.
Still, he returned to the SHIELD facility in Los Angeles with his metaphoric tail between his legs.

Their mission? An utter failure, a fucking disaster. Embarrassing. Even the fact that he was not alone in this mess did not help at all.

Actually, when Clint thought about it, he was still better off than the other two.

Steve would have to answer for disregarding Fury's orders and running off on his own - instead of heading to India, as he had been supposed to. Of course, the soldier did not directly belong to SHIELD as Clint and Natasha did, so the consequences would be negligible.
Still, he would probably get some of his privileges taken from him, lose a good part of reputation and earn himself a scolding no one would envy him for.

And Natasha... Honestly, Clint was glad not be in her skin right now.

Knowing her for such a long time, Clint was able to make out the strain in her face, the unpleasant expectation of what was to come – an expression that was cool indifference for someone who did not know her as well as he did. She knew she had failed and it ate away on her pride.

The loyal agent she was, she would tell Fury every detail of their mission - which inevitably would include her disobedience towards the director's orders.
Instead of killing Stark, like they had been supposed to, she had come up with her own plan, risky and not confirmed by the authorities. It had been a dangerous game she had been playing, yet Clint had seen the reason why and he trusted her intuition without thinking twice.

What was worse, though, was that there actually had been a window of opportunity to fulfill their order - at least parts of it – back in the town where Natasha had been able to get a hold of Stark.
He had been at her mercy and she could have killed him on the spot without giving him the time the even react.
However, she had chosen otherwise. She had underestimated the strength of the bond the engineer and the god shared.
It happened so rarely, one time in a thousand, but it had happened there: the skillful spy had been tricked herself. She had been made to believe that the man she had been ordered to kill was just a harmless, yet still valuable attachment to their actual problem: Loki, the god with whom the whole trouble had started.

That was the point where it became personal for the archer..

One of the main reasons he had been so eager to accept this mission was, of course, his personal involvement with the God of Chaos. This humiliating experience he had had to endure, the people he had killed for him – he had been nothing but a puppet, unable to fight that maniac creeping
inside his head.
Fury trusted his longing for revenge – no matter how much of a professional he was, the director
too had longed to see Loki bleed for what he had done – and Clint had been more than happy to
take the opportunity.
Since his mind had been released from the scepters hold, he had longed for nothing more than to
give Loki a payback. He wanted that fucker on the ground, bleeding and broken, unable to fight
tack just as he had been, before Clint would free him from his misery with an arrow through his
head.
It might abut on an obsession, but he had created dozens of different scenarios in his mind on how
he planned to kill the god and it was Loki’s face that came into his mind when he thought about the
word ‘enemy’.
There was nothing else, it was always his face that appeared in his thoughts each time he
remembered the Chitauri attacking and the lives that had been lost.

From SHIELD files, the archer knew that Loki’s alliance with the Chitauri had been unwound. The
god had nearly been killed by those nasty creatures and apparently he had ended up in hospital –
how Clint regretted that he had not been there!
Even the fact that this little bastard was now working against the army he had once lead to Earth
did not help to lessen his hate for the god the least.

As it seemed now, though, he would never get his chance of revenge on Loki.

Again, Clint had fallen into the clutches of his enemy, helpless and entirely unprepared, just like
the first time he had met the god. Embarrassing. Humiliating. Just thinking about it made his blood
boil with anger.
His sheer inability to do anything against Loki, time after time, always being at his mercy, this was
the worst. It had felt as if he had not even been fighting a person - superhuman being or not – but a
force of nature, uncontrollable and unreasonable.

And in the end, they had been saved by the very person they had been sent to kill.

Nothing had went according to plan and they had not talked much ever since.

After a few depressing days in a car too small for three persons, they eventually, the had ended up
on the subterranean parking lot of the L.A. facility, their expensive car looking like, well, like shit
– coated in layers of mud, dust and scratches all over.
Yet, they had to worry about other things right now and, even in times of crisis, a new car was
nothing worth calling a problem for an organization like SHIELD.

No one of them said a word when they left their vehicle and headed for the elevator. Although they
all knew how to keep their composure, it was impossible to ignore the dirt on their clothes, the
blood and the sweat.
Leaving directly after battle, they had not had the luxury of a shower, so a few splashes of water in
the face had had to be enough. The armed guards greeted them with a faint nod, but their faces did
dnot give away anything and otherwise, they stood perfectly still.
Clint could not read in their eyes, but he was sure that at least a few of the higher ranking members
knew of their failure. Maybe, the message had already spread through the entire facility and those
guys would be snickering as soon as the doors closed.

Whatever. They would probably all know, sooner or later.

The doors closed with a low buzzing noise and the elevator started moving. It was probably the
most awkward elevator ride of his entire life, but he managed to stare at the slowly changing
numbers indicating the level they were on. For an eternity of 12 floors, he wondered what was

going on in the other two heads.
The standardized 'ping' and the doors opened again to the floor where Director Fury had his new
office. Even though he expected them for their report, he knew little of what had actually happened
in the contaminated area. The only thing he knew so far was that they returned with empty hands -
something that had never happened before, not in all those weird and ridiculously dangerous years
Clint and Natasha had been working as a team.

The doors to the other offices were closed when they slowly walked down the hallway, their shoes
still leaving a faint trace of dried dirt on the otherwise spotless floor. You could hear that there
were people present behind these doors, but they could have easily been insurance officers working
for a life assurance.
In fact, due to the hasty nature of this facility's building a few months ago, it felt more like your
average - slightly creepy, though - office block than like the temporary head quarter of an
international intelligence agency.

Clint had never felt comfortable here, he could not see far enough and it almost felt claustrophobic.
Moreover, this odd emptiness of the hallway made you notice every single movement - still,
unusually lost in thoughts, Clint realized the other person only when they were a few steps away
from the door that separated them from one Nick Fury.
He had almost missed him with his inconspicuous appearance, but there was no doubt who was
standing there, looking at them with an insecure, slightly awkward half-smile:

Bruce Banner.

Clint saw Steve's eyes going wide in surprise, his determined pace faltering when he uttered the
doctor's name with joy, yet mixed with an unmistakable portion of skepticism.

“Dr. Banner!”

“Well, that certainly is a surprise.”, the archer could not hold back to say, but the second he
stopped at Steve's side to learn what brought the man back to the land he so despised, Natasha took
both men on their shoulders and shoved them through the door into the Director's office.

Banner, who had been barely able to open his mouth for a greeting, was once again left alone on
the empty hallway to wait in front of closed doors.

As soon as the door clicked shut, their attention focused on the huge desk in front of them. It was
empty – until now. Only the black coat hanging loosely over the chairback indicated who should
normally be sitting here.
The anticipation which had manifested in an unpleasant tightness in his guts was once again
released, but just for the moment. It would not take long for Fury to appear, probably breaking
through the side-door on the wall like a raging bull.
Natasha's hands disappeared from their shoulders and she took a confident stance between the two
taller men, her gaze lingering on the spread files on the desk with sudden interest. Clint followed
her gaze, reading a few of the marked words from upside down:
'India', '10 million dead (dark figure - ?)', 'phone call (Stark!)' - he had no fucking clue what that
was supposed to mean, but he had the faint feeling that the reappearance of Bruce Banner was not
at all coincidentally.

“I have the feeling we will receive some interesting news from the Director.”, Steve stated the
obvious, then turned back to the door as if to look for Banner behind it, before he turned to the
desk again.

“After he picked us apart, first.”, Clint added gloomily.
“I would prefer you to work professional enough not to force such methods upon me.”

The strident voice of Director Nick Fury abruptly interrupted any conversation when he entered the room with fast steps through the side-door. He dumped a heap of files he had been carrying with him on the already quite gigantic heap of files on his desk, then turned towards his agents - and a Captain America who seemed not to be overly confident in this moment - put both his hands on the table surface and scrutinized them with the all-seeing glare from his eye.

“I’m listening – and I know, I won't like what I hear, so I would strongly advise your statements to be clear enough not to make me to have to listen to them twice.”

“With all due respect, sir, but we have underestimated the progress Stark and Loki could make and their will to remain together. We-”

“Let me talk, Steve. Please.”, Natasha interrupted with her specific kind of gentle rudeness which always sounded so reasonable you forgot to become angry. Even Steve fell for it.

Fury's penetrating gaze fell on her face, then he let himself fall on his chair and leaned back, folding his hands on his stomach before he nodded at her.

While Natasha was talking, Clint had time to look. He usually did not contribute an awful lot to these kind of talks, at least regarding the quantity of words said. If he thought it appropriate, he added his point of view, otherwise, he trusted his partner to speak.

His attentive gaze fell on Fury.

Sitting there like this, the man looked old to him. Nobody actually knew how old he was, but you never had a reason to actually think about it, since you could always be sure he would throw you over his shoulder in a second if you just as much as ventured bringing up this topic.

Now, however, he looked old, or probably as old as he actually was. He was beyond anything you could call 'stressed', even worse than usually, and slowly, it started to become visible in his facial features. There were rings under his eyes and he seemed like it was the first time today he had the leisure to sit down – still, he looked like he was about to throw somebody over his shoulder, be it just out of his bad temper.

What was amazing, though, was that he did not cut in until Natasha was finished with giving a complete chronological protocol of their last few weeks.

There was silence in the room and Clint started his inner countdown until hell would break lose, hoping that it would soon be over. He looked out of the window at the clear winter sky, counting the seconds, but then, Steve had to add something.

Inwardly, the archer cursed.

“He has saved our lives from him, Fury. Tony has saved our lives and I think there is still hope that he has not lost track completely. Whatever it is he plans with Loki, it does not involve hurting or killing randomly. We just have to intervene properly, before he loses his influence on Loki, so that-”

“So that until then, this motherfucker can just rampage like that with a power so strong that he almost got you three fuckersand Iron Man killed within a few fucking minutes?!”
15 seconds was what Clint had counted, then he broke his own stride when he flinched at the director's sudden rising from his chair.

“I sent you with the admission to KILL and because of a sudden flash of nostalgia, you spare Stark?! For what? If I had wanted to have a little hen party with a boozer, I'd have gone myself – but I sent you, Agent Romanoff, and you disappointed me deeply.”

“The plan was risky, but I thought it worth a try. He was vulnerable. But, it failed, and I take full responsibility.”

There was not even a shiver in her voice, but one could see how she hated herself for her decision. Her arms, crossed in front of her chest, were like a shield against her boss, a shield she usually did not need. Not that he intimidated her, everybody knew that this was not the case. No, the failure had hurt her pride as an agent, as the best female agent SHIELD had and Clint could understand her from the bottom of his soul.

“I share that opinion. It won't happen again and I will personally bring you Loki's head on an arrow if we have another go.”

Like the sudden heat of a concentrated laser beam, Fury's rage swashed from the spy on his side on to him, burning his flaring up self-assurance with a few words.

“So I hired two idiots to be my best men! You are supposed to fire when I say so and what I said is that you fire when Stark does not obey. Do you have any fucking idea what is going on out there?! I need men to rely on, men who do their fucking job. Its us against chaos and if you start getting sentimental, then the world is going down. It is going down, right now, right in front of our windows! Here and over the ocean and in every fucking corner of the world, so what we don't need are another two persons running around as living, intelligent weapons of mass destruction!”

There was not much to add to that, since it was true.

They all knew that they had fucked up, so they accepted their scolding – which was not as bad as he had anticipated, compared to what he had already experienced with the man behind the desk.

Just when the archer thought it to be over, it started all over again.

“And for you-”, with that, the laser-beam vanished and left a swath of destruction until it came to a hold on Steve, “what were you thinking?!”

It was a question better not to be answered, but Captain America had never been afraid to talk back if he felt in the right, whatever everyone else thought. It made up a good deal of his integrity, yet sometimes, it only caused more problems.

“I did the only reasonable thing. Forcing a man to leave his chosen exile for a wasted continent is, in my opinion, not half as justified as talking the man with the gun in his hand into handing it over. Especially, if this man is a common friend who has alot of worth to all of us, even to you. We need Tony. We need him to undo whatever Loki is doing and we need him to get out of all of this alive. We need him alive – and, as we saw just now, Dr. Banner came back without any effort from our side whatsoever.”

You could barely estimate the number of swear words which were about to blurt out of the thin line which were Fury's lips, but then, a beeping noise from the intercom interrupted the tense silence in
the most unfitting manner.

Four pairs of eyes fell onto the tiny device on the desk from which the rustling sound of an unsteady connection originated. Until the noise cleared out and they could all hear the voice of Coulson:

““We found the origin of the atmospheric disruption. Thor has returned to Earth, we're bringing him in.”

This day was going to be even weirder, as it seemed.

Chapter End Notes

We know it's going sluggishly...but we're already working on two other chapters and have the ambition to have this fanfiction finished before the 1.April.
The upcoming Semesterbreak will hopefully help with that :P
And yes, what a coincidence that Steve, Clint and Natasha return at the same time with Thor xD
With a wide gesture, Fury pushed open the double door leading outside to the rooftop. A gush of wind blew in their faces and let his coat fly, but the director moved on without faltering, directly towards the landing helicopter. The others were all hurrying after him, bodies tense, a strange excitement vibrating in the air.

It would be a blatant lie to say that it did not affect Bruce as well. The outlook of seeing Thor again, to hear what he had to tell about the events in Asgard, what had happened to everywhere else but earth. It would probably not be good news, but he had been absent a long time and sheer curiosity made him want to hear all of it.

Since his landing in L.A three days prior, he had gained zero useful information, but had his skepticism towards SHIELD and their methods ten times confirmed. Although it seemed like they had been waiting for him – from what he had overheard from the conversation in Fury's office, they apparently had – and had offered him an anonymous place to stay, fresh clothes and warm, microwaved meals, the doctor again did not feel treated equally.

Agent Hill had asked him everything about the situation in India and he had answered her questions dutifully. Not because of SHIELD, but because he wanted these people he had left behind to get official, long-overdue help. Yet, the answers to his questions had been postponed to some indefinite later date and he knew, after two days, that he would have to look for them himself if he really wanted to know.

What he knew was not much more than what he had known after Tony's strange phone call a few months before: The inventor had left his mansion, or rather fled from a hospital, accompanied by Loki. It was unknown what they were planning, but they seemed to be planning something. Something big, as he knew Tony.

That was the information they trusted him with and, until today, he had now known whom to ask or where to look exactly for something less vague. He had felt strangely unfitting here and had been already deciding that the whole trip had been a mistake. Surely, he would meet more appreciation in the crowded hospitals in India than he met here.

It felt odd to him, utterly wrong, sitting in such perfectly clean rooms when he had been sweating in the dusty streets not a week ago. He had always needed some time to accommodate.

In front of them, the helicopter had come down on its designated point of landing and the doors opened. And there he was, Thor, his tall muscled figure an unmissable eye-catcher. His hair had grown measurably longer and waved in the harsh breeze from the rotor blades when he peeked out of the helicopter door's opening.

Something was odd, though, and it did not need the Asgardian to wait for the loud machine to stand completely still before he jumped the small height to the ground, so that everybody saw exactly what it was. His landing was strangely stiff, the usual relaxed assurance with which he carried his battle-proofed body was lacking its smoothness.

“Good day, mortal friends. Reunited at last, though the circumstances are grave.”

The warm genuine smile he greeted his friends with belied the searching gaze with which he
mustered the incomplete group of the Avengers, but his face changed to a more grim expression immediately when he found what he had obviously been looking for.

The next seconds, several intentions collided when three people spoke almost simultaneously.

“Where is the Man of Iron?”

“What's happened to your leg?”

“Where have you been?”

It was Thor who answered first, aware of his position as a visitor after a long absence. His face, usually so jovial and friendly, had gotten more earnest since Bruce had seen him the last time and it was painful to know that the misery and the grief was not limited to earth. The leg was a battle-wound, certainly, and you did not need a PhD to diagnose that there were other wounds, far deeper and harder to recover, that were not at all physical.

“It is a dark time for the Nine Realms, and a dark time for Asgard, as my messenger must have told you. The Chitauri have raged in our Golden Realm and reminded us that not even an Aesir, much less a king, is invulnerable.”

There was a short silence in which everybody pondered those words. From further down, you heard the distant noise of traffic.

“Yet, I'm afraid I come here because of something else entirely, as Heimdall has informed me that-”

“- your bastard brother has run off with Stark?”, Fury interrupted, earning a half-surprised, half-offended look from Thor.

“Then you already know more than I do, I'm afraid.”, the god answered and Bruce could hear a vague distrust from Thor's words.

He had been long gone, things had changed, worlds destroyed and allies shifted, yet he knew that Fury had never been a particular friend of Loki. Inwardly, the doctor's excitement intensified as things were getting more and more entangled. He felt like he was the one knowing the least of them all.

“I think we should all have a talk. Inside.”

Fury's command was followed without any objection.

“We are recovering from the attacks only slowly. Much wrong has been done, there are many brave soldiers to mourn and the glory which has been our city is but a shadow of what it once was. The attacks have focused on the palace and the surrounding inner city, yet the rural areas have not been spared, either. My people suffer greatly, although they carry their fate with grace. We have been waiting for further attacks, yet they did not come the weeks after.”

They had all sat down in one of the conference rooms in the building, surrounding a round table, the curtains halfway closed so that the room was held in a strange grayish twilight.

Thor spoke with a solemn voice, like reciting from an old book. He did not direct his look at one person only, but spoke to each and everyone of them.
You could feel that he had done that a lot recently, speaking to groups of people. As a king, it was his duty, and despite all the losses they had to mourn, he looked matured on this task given to him so involuntarily.

Bruce looked at his lap while listening, feeling chilly.

“I know they will come back, sooner or later. They will not leave anything intact, nor realm will withstand their triumphal procession for universal domination.”

He faltered, just for a second, before he went on.

“My friends, it shames me to inform you that the very tool they need for their triumphal procession to be a success, they stole from the royal weapon's vault. The Chitauri took the Tesseract.”

Bruce froze for a second and abruptly looked up. What?!

However, the expressions displayed around the table were not those of terror, but of a slightly uncomfortable knowledge. Gazes were exchanged between Steve, Natasha, Clint and Fury, but a daring look from the director's eye ensured that everybody kept his mouth shut as Thor went on talking.

There was something fishy going on, he could feel it and that untold knowledge made him feel almost sick.

“Until today, I have been sure that they had killed Loki during their first attack as well. His cell has been found empty and covered in blood, his as well as the Chitauri's. Their hunger for revenge is endless and to think they would show mercy towards his failure would be naive – but, it turned out that something else seems to have occurred. Heimdall spotted Loki here on earth, accompanied by one of my mortal friends...”

At this point, Tony's absence in this room was so screaming out loud, that Bruce had to clear his throat uncomfortably.

“I felt it hard to believe his words, but his eyes see everything and his loyalty to me is unbroken. He does not lie about what he sees, and, as you have told me before, it turned out to be true... It remains still unchanged that I cannot think of his intentions here, nor why he has chose the Man of Iron to be on his side. Even how he has managed to escape his cell and flee the Chitauri remains unclear to me. So, I have been honest with you and you now know of the unadorned situation I just come from. Tell me what it is you already know about the dealings of my brother.”

“This is not as easy as it might sound.”, Steve commented, shaking off the rigor of sorrow which had overcome all of them during Thor's words by leaning forward onto the table.

Bruce chuckled drily.

“Do your best, then. I know exactly as much as Thor does, so maybe its time we all get to know what is actually going on here.”

"Stark's gone bananas and paired up with Loki to blow shit up with the Tesseract, that's what happened. Believe me, I can tell, I was there when that godly maniac went totally rabid.", Clint added his own version of the story, but was quickly corrected by Steve.

"We still don't know what their actually goal is. We only know that they have been extremely persistent so far and would do about everything to reach it – but they did not kill us."

"They tried, though.”, Clint added with a fretted expression.
"Loki went out of control and Tony stopped him."

"My brother is in possession of the Tesseract?!", Thor interrupted in astonishment.

"Guys, enough of this.", Natasha intervened between the two wranglers firmly, before she looked at Thor and confirmed his question with a quiet 'Yes.'.

With a few glances, she had obviously noticed the deep furrowed brows on both Thor’s and Bruce’s faces. The scientist had actually no idea what to make of these information, but it sounded chaotic and way too complex to be told by only one person.

There were already sides taken in this story, a few of them prominent, others more subtle and he could not tell which of them was on top at the moment. A quick look at Fury showed that the director was watching his group of remarkable people silently, but with a grim face. He seemed not interested in interfering for once and somehow, Bruce could already tell again that he was planning something.

"I will explain what happened, everything I know. What we do about this information has to be decided later on. Alright?"

Bruce nodded and Thor focused his attention back on Steve again when the Captain started talking.

A few minutes later, things had become more stringent, yet more enigmatic at the same time.

The doctor had put his glasses on the table and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, eyelids pressed together tightly.

No matter that it had been Steve’s version of the events, who pretty obviously espoused Tony, Bruce could not believe anyway that the inventor would be in for a plan which aimed at hurting or killing others without reasons. He had not known him a long time, but he was sure that Tony was not a bad man.

Yet, he had been a broken man when he had seen him last, a man who had lost his one true love and with that, his will to live. In a state like this, people did things. Some of them shot themselves, Tony Stark, apparently, made pacts with the enemy for – for what exactly?

That was the crucial point of the whole discussion, because right here, the second variable came up, a variable Bruce did not dare to predict as easily as he did with Tony.

"What is it Loki wants with him?"

The scientist just said out loud what he had been thinking, interrupting a conversation which topic somehow had gone past him while he had been concentrating.

"His brain, obviously. Or what is left up there, after all that booze.", Fury answered matter-of-factly, but not without a certain hint of spite.

"Yeah, but for what? And why should Tony come with him? Is he mind-controlled? If the Tesseract’s is part of the game, then we can not be sure just what of their plan is actually their plan and what is... not."

"He is not. I saw it in his eyes, he is clean.", Natasha answered before somebody else could, then turned towards Thor, something akin to heartfelt sympathy on her face, "What I can't completely confirm for Loki, though."

"The Tesseract has a will on her own, her consciousness goes beyond anything our minds can comprehend. Even if my brother has forcefully brought her in his possession, she will always
arrange the greater schemes to her purposes, whatever those are. The power she wields is too much for just one mind to bear and Loki knows this quite well, but I'm afraid his longing for revenge is clouding his sober mind. My brother wants power and he can easily influence a mourning soul for aiding him in his plans.”

Thor made a pause, looking to the table, then up in Fury's eyes, who sat opposite of him.

“There is nothing good to come from this and they have to be stopped. With the Tesseract back in Asgard's possession, our chances to fight the Chitauri increase tenfold.”

“That was what we were trying to do.”, the director answered and he sounded reasonable while saying it.

What Thor understood in ‘stopping them’ necessarily had to differ from Fury's understanding, yet he kept the impression of diplomacy. He did not sound like he had sent the two agents to kill, but that was what he had done and Bruce felt the strong urge to just stand up and leave the table. Things had not changed at all.

As always, authorities seemed unable or unwilling to learn from the past and so, SHIELD followed the same politics they had followed a year ago, even though they had only barely let to success – and that only because of a person who followed his own politics.

“But that's not everything! You can not reduce what they do to a simple act of regaining power. Hawkeye, Black Widow – you have seen them together: It did not look like Tony was just his minion, a tool for Loki's resurrection. This is Tony Stark we are dealing with again, and he has taken the disaster of his life to become better. He has a suit - and a damn powerful one at that - and he has a connection to Loki. They're working together for something, but it's not just revenge or power. If that'd be all, they wouldn't have been there, on the East Coast, where there is nobody to test this power on.”

Steve's outrage was genuine and Bruce could only nod in sympathy. Although he had not been here the whole time, even from what he had heard it did not sound like a plain alliance of convenience. It was all too complicated, too much of it still left in the dark, to jump to conclusions like this.

“He has a point.”, Natasha threw in, “They formed a bond. That's what we did not see. Yet, this does not mean that they're any less dangerous to humanity. Loki is like an awakened volcano, what we saw were only the first rumbles in the earth before he eventually erupts. That they need to be stopped is obvious, I think we can all agree to that. The question is how and to what purpose.”

“Let me be the scape-goat here, because at least somebody has to say the truth: They have squandered their fucking chances. What is valuable for us is the Tesseract – we need a weapon we can put our hands on, not a lose cannon on the ground.”

Fury crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked into the group with a challenging glare. It took not a second for Steve to counter his words, quickly supported by Thor.

From then on, the talk stretched for hours.

They did not come to a conclusion, of course not. Impossible to separate personal relationships from serious business, to say which way to save the world was best, when you did not know what you were exactly saving it from.

Bruce eventually left the room without giving a reason why. After the door clicked shut, he felt himself exhale deeply as there was suddenly quietness around him. Behind the steel door, one could hear the voices arguing, pointless and without the chance of finding a real plan of action.
Bruce went to get himself some food, his stomach was aching. When he stepped on the street, it was already dark outside and when he came back to his room an hour later, he had decided to take the next plane tomorrow.

There was nothing you could call The Avengers any longer. The chemistry was different, the potential for greatness had been corrupted and he felt he did not belong. If there was anything he would be needed here for, it was not him they would need. The Other Guy was that weapon Fury would want to lay his hands on, although he was more of a lose cannon himself rather than something to be operated by another. Bruce did not want to be that, for nobody.

He wanted to leave all this.

Maybe it was gutless, but he felt that it was not his field of expertise. He had left once before and things had gone down the tubes well enough without him. It did bother him, though, what was happening across the country, what this unlikely pair of men was doing with this power in their hands. Perhaps they were more successful than they were over here, who knew. They would know soon enough and, strangely, this sense of impending doom did not stir fear in Bruce, but only resignation. He needed a good night's sleep.

It should not come to any of this.

“May I talk to you for a minute, doctor?”

Leaning against the doorframe of his room was Steve Rogers. He had changed his clothes and was now wearing a plain jeans and t-shirt, his hair and face again cleaned from the exertions of his long, fruitless journey.

The smile Bruce gave him appeared kind of forced.

“You may, but you may not be satisfied with my answers. This-”, he made a small gesture with his hand, including the whole SHIELD-complex they were in, “is nothing but hubris. I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“I beg you to stay, though. It is people like you which are needed most.”

Bruce just shook his head in an amused, sad way, then opened his door with his chip-card and then invited Captain America in.

“So, you have found a conclusion to our problem, then? Because you did not sound like it when I left.”

“We haven't and I doubt we will. Not with the fronts hardened like this, you heard it, too. That's why I will leave SHIELD – and I want you with me, Banner.”

They had sat down on the small table on the one side of the room, the scenery only dimly lit by a sole lamp. For a moment, paranoia took over, and Bruce let his gaze wander over suspicious spots in the furniture, looking for spy equipment. He had looked for it before, but he was sure he would not find it with his bare eyes.

“Maybe we should speak in code words, I'm almost certain Fury will be at least offended to hear from your separation plans.”

“I will tell him face to face, that is not the point. You haven't answered my question, yet.”
Bruce sighed deeply and leaned back, his fingers tapping a soundless rhythm on his thigh. Then, he shook his head.

“No, no. That's not what I should do. I won't fight again.”

“It's not necessarily fighting what will be needed from you, although the Hulk is always a good argument in conversations which threaten to spiral out of control. I want to go back to the East Coast, even if they made clear they don't want us. We can only be sure what to do when we know what they are up to. And it's not only them – there are the Chitauri, still, we have to offer opposition and I have seen with my own eyes that plain military is not the way to go. I'm almost sure Thor will come with me and we will find a way to get the two assassins in out boat as well.”

“That's a noble idea, but you can't count on me. There'll be no further battlefields for me, I'll be of more use behind the lines. Despite that, my trust in people seeing reason is, to put it mildly, meager.”

The blonde slowly nodded, gaze lost in the distance for a few seconds. He seemed not satisfied with the answer, but that was nothing Bruce could do anything about. It was truly admirable, the endless optimism he held up, the trust he still had in people and their ability to do good, but Bruce was not Captain America.

He was nobody who gave people hope and who had the ability to inspire them. The only thing he did was sow the wounds others caused, he was not the man for a task like this. Of course, he could have the Hulk just take over for him, but he feared the consequences – both for his own soul and for others. The Other Guy would just do more damage than there had been originally.

“I would accept your decision, if we had the choice. Yet, we don't have it. There will be no one who needs you as a doctor when the Chitauri come back and have success. They will kill and slaughter and burn their way through the universe if we just sit here and wait for them, wherever it is you sit in the world. Be it here in L.A. or over in Europe, or in Asia. But right now, we have the advantage! They don't expect us to attack, they don't expect us able to get the Tesseract and turn the tables. Maybe we can change Tony's mind, because I think it's not too late to pull him over to our side – and Loki... we will find a way to deal with Loki.”

Bruce knew him to be right and he felt weak for being stylized as that one guy whose fault it would be if everything went wrong in the end. It was really a gift Steve had there, to be able to talk like this and appeal to the only goal he had dedicated himself to after all the bad he had done to the world:

His wish to do good to people, to redeem himself.

“I refuse to be used as a tool for your purposes the same as I refuse to be a tool for SHIELD. If I come with you, it's on my own volition and you won't stop me when I decide otherwise.”

He was almost angry at the other for talking him into it like that, but what else should he do than accept?

The Captain would not be able to take him with him against his will anyway and Bruce was almost sure he would never try to. Still, he wanted to play with open cards from the beginning - there was nothing he hated more than dishonesty.

“Of course. Thank you, Doctor.”

“Bruce.”
Steve smiled at him and he could not help but smile back, then scratched the back of his head.

“Yes, Bruce. Thank you. I will talk to Thor immediately, but your help is greatly appreciated.”

It took not even 5 minutes to convince Thor, because when he found them in the canteen, he was already brooding with a grim anger. The muscles of his strong arms tensed and eased with his inner restlessness to just do something, because that was what he had came for. After all, he was still Thor, he was still the God of Thunder and now he also was King of Asgard and it did not suit him the least to be caught in this place, doing nothing.

“I will be honored fighting at your side again!”

A hard slap against Steve’s shoulder showed just how he meant his words, a slap Bruce could fortunately avoid by staying in the background. At first, he had not wanted to come with their team leader at all, but then he had decided that he felt it inappropriate to stay in his room just like that when Steve did his best to convince the others.

So, he was here now, nestling on the sleeve of his shirt while he watched that typical, broad smile reappear on Thor’s face when he was talking about how much he appreciated their friendship. It caused a warm feeling of hope in his chest, a feeling of belonging somehow, to know that there were people who were actually willing to fight the good fight.

Perhaps, his decision to stay had not been that bad at all.

It was not as easy to get their message across to Clint and Natasha, though. They found them together in Natasha’s room, both engaged in a low, but heated discussion which immediately flared up again once Steve had put forth his matter, phrased as carefully as possible.

“What’s that going to be, mutiny?”

Clint was more than skeptical – not so much because of his loyalty to SHIELD, but more because he shared Fury’s view concerning Loki. He sat cross-legged on one of the chairs, having changed into new clothes as well, same with the Widow. She, on the other hand, did not utter her feelings towards this directly, she just sat there, thinking, her gaze switching from Steve to Thor to Bruce and back.

“Look, Clint, I understand your anger, but you must have noticed that SHIELD, or its head, does not follow the best policy. I trust your abilities, each and everyone of us has proven himself worthy being called an Avenger, but I do not trust Fury. We’re more efficient if we work independently.”

“Oh, I would happily come with you, if you’d allow me to give this little fucker what he deserves – but no, you are choosing the sentimental way and that’s not going to work out. I won’t depart here, risk my job and go back to contaminated ground just to see you folk get your asses kicked just like we had our asses kicked before. Right, Nat?”

All eyes fell on the red-head, who looked strangely casual to Bruce in her sweatpants and T-shirt. Not, that he would not look gorgeous in whatever she was wearing – or less able to kick their asses.

“It’s not loyalty holding me back, but I don’t think you fully grasp the force you will be dealing with. You remember the rejection we met the last time, they won’t be willing to talk to you now, just because you gathered old friends.”

“It’s not whether they are willing to talk – if they are not, they will face consequences. Maybe the
three of us weren't enough, but with Thor and the Hulk, we'll surely be able to take on Loki. If it comes to that. We just have to do something and we have to do it soon, because they are getting closer to their goal with every day and we sit here.”

Steve was determined and Bruce just let him speak, as long as what he said was the same as what Bruce thought. Even Thor was silent, although he underlined the supersoldier's words sometimes with an approving 'Aye.'

The scientist wondered whether Fury was able to listen to what was going on in the very innermost part of his facility and how he would react.

“You are a great team-leader, you don't need to prove yourself with more great words. Instead you should think pragmatically, first, if you proclaim such plans: independent from SHIELD, what resources do we have to rely on? Where do we stay, how do we move? The world still runs by money and I, for myself, don't even have a lucky penny.”

The archer still remained opposed to the whole idea, although the barricade of his stubbornness seemed to crumble.

“He has a point there.”, Bruce added thoughtfully, “Tony's absence does tear an impressive hole in our financial support and equipment matters.”

“I have a house, as a start.”

Steve seemed slightly uncomfortable with the fact that he was a house-owner, for whatever reasons. When he earned surprised looks, he hastily explained the circumstances, since he had practically been living in the SHIELD facility for months now.

“It was a gift, from a property agency service. Just after New York, they asked me to live in one of their houses, so that they could use my name in their advertisements. I had no flat, so, well, I thought it might come in handy one day. I never put a foot in it, though.”

Despite the fact that he was supposed to be grudging, the corners of Clint's mouth twitched in amusement. It was not hard to imagine that humble Steve had a hard time accepting a deal like that, but turning it into a temporary Avengers HQ would certainly give the place a proper meaning.

“This does not solve the vehicle-probl-”

“Count us in.”

Clint's eyes widened in surprise, then he turned towards his partner with an indignant look.

“Why did you just-??”

“It's the only way. We're in.”

Her sweet smile was nothing you could argue with, so the other agent just slowly, very slowly closed his mouth and then sat there with a grumpy face.

Thor, more in the background until now, beamed.

“It is decided and pronounced, then. Tomorrow, we will depart.”

Chapter End Notes
Exams are over (at least for one of us), and the next two chapters are almost finished. Means you won't have to wait that long for the next updates. Also, next chapters will be Tony and Loki again :) 

Any horaay for the (almost) reunited Avengers!
Peace

Chapter Notes

Just a suggestion, you could listen to this song while reading the first scene of this chapter, since it actually was the inspiration for it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“... I still think we should go.”

“You have no sense for atmosphere, do you?”

“It's a wasteland. You find more atmosphere in a graveyard.”

Loki reduced his answer to an eye-roll and turned away from Tony again.

His long legs dangling over the edge, he had sat down on the flat rooftop they were on, enjoying the view – he had to admit that the dusty ruins bathed in the faint light of a setting winter-sun had their own appeal. The inventor kept himself in the background, standing a few feet behind the god with his suit still on and ready for take-off.

In all detail, the mortal had made clear just why he did not see the sense in an extension of their break, here, on a rooftop, where you could be seen for miles.

Yet, Loki knew he had a point Tony could not argue against -which increased his frustration even further - there was no one here to see them.

Also, Loki had his own reason to stay a little longer.

After endless hours of walking through the remains of the city of New York, their previous assumption had turned out right: The Chitauri were gone, impossible to say whether they were dead or had just moved on. No traces to give them the slightest clue, just signs of a long lost battle everywhere.

The reminder of thousands over thousands of dead souls – even if only mortal - weighed heavy upon one when walking through the empty streets, but the nameless, traceless horror of the nuclear war was even more prominent. For an hour, they had walked through the nothingness which had once been the city center, both men silent, their expressions only grim masks.

In the end, it had been worth it nonetheless - to a certain degree at least.

They knew the Chitauri were gone and they knew it definitely, since their search had been thorough and they had not left out any district.

Tony was the one who had wanted to find a place for the night, or just hunt after the Chitauri right away – it was obvious that the human did not care. With his suit, they could be in Asia in a few hours, he had said, killing aliens there, but Loki had other plans for the time being.

“If you start getting romantic on me, I'm gone, you know that. C'mon now.”

“You have been silent the entire day and it has been a pleasant change of pace. Why now break that development? Come, sit with me.”
Loki could tell that Tony made a face behind his back, although he did not see it, since he was still facing in the other direction.
Eventually, he heard the mechanic noise of the Iron Man suit coming closer, until it appeared in the periphery of his vision and the other sat down.

They sat in silence for a time, even the wind had stopped howling.

"Do you know what to do now?", Loki eventually asked.
He was staring in the distance, lost in thoughts. There was still one thing he had to tell Tony. The mortal thought that their only enemy were the Chitauri – he had no idea that there was a much greater threat lurking in the depths of the universe.

Throughout their entire journey, Loki had retained from telling the mortal the truth about their real enemy, but now, as they had come to a point where everything seemed to be open for change again, it suddenly became necessary.
He had no idea how Tony would react... if he would take Loki concealing such an important piece of information lightly, or if he would be disappointed, even angry.

"Asia, I would say. Or Mexico, that's just an hour from here probably, if I carry you, and I'm pretty sure that there are still some Chitauri left. I really don't see the point in wasting our time here."

"Because I have to tell you something."

Loki did not need to look at Tony to know that the mortal had turned his head to stare at him, he could picture his brows furrowed over his dark eyes, surprise in his look. He had surely not expected Loki to make any sudden revelations, not now.

"You want to confess that you stole the cookies while I was sleeping? Oh, no, please don't tell me you crashed the car on purpo-"

"Did I ever tell you how I ended up with the Chitauri?", Loki asked, silencing the human effectively with his question. He was still staring into the distance, not sure whether he would be able to tell what he was about to tell if he had to see the expression in Tony's face while doing it.

"No...I suppose not."

The mortal's answer was hesitant, his tone lower, indicating that he had eventually realized that something important was about to follow. Loki would tell him about one of the darkest chapters of his long and eventful life - something he had not told anyone before.
He had imagined this conversation numerous times, had gone through all the possible reactions in his head while the other had been sleeping at his side. Now, here, feeling the wind, smelling the dust and dirt and sensing Tony's gaze on him, it still felt harder than he had been able to imagine it.

There was no going back now, though.

"You know that Thor got banished to Earth, a while ago?"

The human nodded.

"That happened right after his supposed coronation, which I... ruined by letting three enemy soldiers into the weapon's vault. Of course, they have been killed before any real damage was done, but Thor, hot-headed and haughty as he had always been, was unable to control his temper and went to attack them in their home-realm, breaking the millennia old truce between the two species. He was thrown to Midgard as a punishment, and then, after Odin fell into the Odinsleep because..."
I... confronted him, I was declared king for the time being. Thor's warrior friends opposed the decision and used the very first opportunity to commit high treason. I sent a device – the Destroyer – to punish them for their actions.”

Loki took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for the next part. There was no way back now, so, the sooner he was over with it, the better.

“Eventually, it ended with Thor regaining his powers, returning to Asgard and fighting against me. During that battle... I was thrown off the Bifrost, into the abyss that stretches around the Realm. It is a place no one has ever returned from.”

Tony had watched him the entire time, silently for once, soaking up the information he received. Still, he was sure that the mortal noticed just how much vital facts he simply left out, even without looking at his face. If they would find the time again, perhaps he would find the courage to tell the story in its entirety.

Now, however, completeness was not the main point. There was just too much to tell, too much to explain.

Too much Loki did not want Tony to know.

“There is no sense of time when you are in the void, so I don't know how long I was lost and falling, but, as you might have already assumed, I ended up in the Chitauri's homeworld... or what was left of it. There they found me, entirely deprived of any strength and magic, and attempted to drag me to the feet of one of their commanders. I fought them, I can't even remember exactly how, but I know that I killed many. Their leader - they only call him 'The Other', he is a disgusting beast – noticed that I was no ordinary creature and came to the conclusion that I could be useful for his master.”

Loki stopped again, realizing that his sentences had started to get shorter and that he became faster and more breathless with each word. He sighed and glanced down at his hands. Even now, an entire universe away from the dreaded being, he felt not at ease talking about him.

Yet, he went on.

“I was delivered to a being they call Thanos. He was a Titan once, a species originating from your solar system, but he had left millennia ago. Tales say that he once met Death herself to fall in eternal love with her, but most only assume that he is insane and therefore they call him the Mad Titan. And really, his thinking is warped. He is obsessed with Death and he wants to deliver his Mistress as many tributes as he possibly can. Billions upon billions he killed for her, wiping out entire species and planets... even the Chitauri are nothing more than his pawns.

Yet, I did not know who he was when I saw this... thing the first time. I was weakened and injured, my body contained no more strength to fight back. I thought I had nothing to lose. He made me an offering and I accepted: I would lead his army to Midgard and deliver the Tesseract to Thanos. In exchange, I would regain my freedom and even more - I would be handed the planet Earth, to rule it as its king. There was nothing I wanted than getting away from this place as fast as I could... I knew that the only chance I had, if I wanted to do so alive, was by accepting his bargain.

Also, a part of me yearned to have revenge upon Thor and I could not think of a better way than attacking his beloved Midgard.”

Only now, Loki dared to turn around to face Tony.

He did not know what his reaction would be like, now after he had told him the truth. Most of it,
The human had already accepted so much and he had stayed with him, even though he had seen Loki's weakness... but this was something else. Loki had killed people and had destroyed, knowing fully well what he was doing.

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Tony stared at Loki for about a minute without words, eyes a dark penetrating glare which met the unusually hesitant look in the god's face without a sign of clemency. He could almost feel how uncomfortable the other felt, how hard this revelation had been for him and how the anticipation for his answer was killing him.

In those last minutes, questions had been answered for Tony he had always sensed to be there, but had never known how to put into words. Now, he knew. Not everything, by far not everything, but enough to make sense of the god's behavior which had always seemed nothing but destructive - systematic, but destructive.

The result had been devastating nonetheless, yet the intentions behind had been entirely different.

Tony had expected them to be different, he had always attributed the god more agency in his own actions. It was funny, actually, that he had thought Loki to be more malicious and less... stupid. He felt bad for him - very bad, the longer he thought about it – when he imagined only a glimpse of what Loki had had to endure. It was beyond his wildest imaginations, this feeling of being lost in the endless void of space, lost to his family and everything he loved without a chance of return.

Yes, of course he had thought about what he himself would have done in this situation - in fact, what he had done in a situation similar to this.

The sheer proportions were not even remotely comparable, yeah, he knew that, and, for once, he was modest enough not to act like they were. What had fueled him to leave his own personal way through hell was the memory of what he had left behind and of what he had to earn himself again – Loki did not have anything like this. He had had to start from scratch, to build himself something new which matched his always neglected desire for grace and power.

From what Tony had experienced with Loki in their time spent together, it was incredibly easy to pick out the predetermined breaking point in the god's nerves.

Making a pact with the enemy was always an option, he understood that very well, and he knew Loki had known it, too. But to be so blinded by the outlook to actually think a being with powers much higher than your own would ever grant you powers on your own, independence even – he could not follow Loki there.

How could he have been so blind?

For his senseless strive to regain his powers and his self-assurance, to remodel his very self-conception, Loki seemingly had convinced himself that there was nothing to lose and had set all objections at naught, forgetting that there were other beings in this universe, struggling for their own lives as well...

The inventor remembered the first time he had met Loki. His first impression was still very prominent to him and it had never turned out wrong, not even now, after he knew the whole story. Or, as he knew Loki, at least the most basic outlines of that story.

The trickster was obsessed with his denied right for power and even at his weakest hour, this self-centered wish had led him into a conquering expedition to earth – it had made him survive all of this, but the prize others had to pay was gruesome.

Strangely enough, with all those questions answered, he felt again how little he actually knew
about Loki. It honored him to be the person to be told a story like this, but given their momentary circumstances, it had only been a matter of time for him to tell him.

The real news lied in exactly one name: Thanos.

Actually, it had been more than high time for the god to tell him about this guy - there was a whole new dimension of threat they were facing with this … person involved. What had been blurred masses of wiggling Chitauri bodies now made room to see the puppet master behind, the final boss, so to speak, and a far greater enemy than he had ever imagined to face.

When he spoke again, he realized he had still not decided whether he was actually angry.

Yes, he was, for being told that their supposed suicide mission might probably actually turn out as a real suicide mission, for being the last to know – although kind of the first, come to think about it – that Loki had made this deal in the past and that he was in this deal now as well, whether he liked it or not.

In the same time, he knew that there was no use in getting all wrought up about things you could not change any more.

He had learned his lesson well when it came to this.

"You talk for hours just to tell me that it's actually not an entire army, but just this Thanos-guy we have to pay a visit?"

A series of emotions appeared and vanished again on Loki's face: Surprise first, then relief, then suddenly skepticism and silent reproach flared up violently, in the end confusion. He did not avert his gaze, though, and when he answered, his voice became unintentionally louder.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"It's all that matters now."

Apparently, this was not the answer Loki had wanted to hear.

Maybe he had expected Tony to be outraged or repelled, maybe he wanted him to be. He was sure that this story in its entirety had not been told to anyone before, because it was not a story you told anybody. It was a story you told people you trusted and were close to you, or strangers in a dark, shabby bar, but since this story had had its beginning, Loki had not had the opportunity for neither.

"You are not interested, then?!"

The accusation was not even hidden in Loki's tone and Tony, who had been composed until now, lost his cool.

"In the fact that you're a murderer? I knew that. That you're a coward and a show-off – yeah, I knew that as well. You're a thousand year old child looking for mommy's praise, no matter whether you destroy whole people or planets. That's cold coffee. I accept that – as long as you're sorry and try to redeem yourself."

He halted, listening to the sound of his own voice echoing in the emptiness around, then regarded Loki with a piercing glance and asked, voice much quieter:

"You are sorry, are you?"

"Yes."

Tony did not grant himself the pleasure of complacency, but went on.
“See? There's just one new information in there: That Mr. Creepy you so unwisely made this bad business with. A strong idea in theory, but executed poorly, since we are both now sitting here because of its consequences.”

There was silence from Loki's part and Tony did not know whether he had reacted too practical, too focused on the real, material implications of Loki's confession. He knew the real pain behind telling a story of defeat like this, but he also knew that he hated being called out for every single detail he made a wrong decision with. He was sure, Loki remembered all those details very vividly himself.

“I knew before that you fucked up. I still came with you. Now I know just how royally you fucked up and why. I won't leave you here because you are a selfish dick who makes bad decisions.”

This was a huge underestimation of what Loki had done, but what should he do? It was not like he had bought a pig in a poke when he had decided to come with Loki. Again, there was silence, until the god shifted his position and again stared in the distance, not facing Tony any longer. The engineer could not read from his profile, all he saw was a gravity which did not have anything of relief in it.

Not that he would have expected such.

They sat in silence for over ten minutes and, if not for the suit, Tony would have started to feel cold. The wind was biting, his face was coarse and his eyes reddened from the harsh breeze, but he remained sitting there, until he eventually could not keep still any longer.

“Did you ever ate Pizza?”

“What?”

Loki frowned and turned to him again.

“So you haven't. We should do that one time – after we're done with that Titan, you know. What about speed-boating?”

“I don't... no, I haven't done that.”

“Ok. We can arrange that. Or I could buy you a fancy sports-car, if I ever got the money again.”

Again, they fell into silence, just that Loki now looked a bit baffled. When Tony prattled on, about gambling and Donuts and surfing and the thrill of sex in public toilets, a muffled chuckle escaped the other's mouth. Tony turned around to him and cracked a grin when he saw how Loki's face had lightened up a bit and he even took part in this little senseless game.

“I'm sure the day will come when we can try this out. And just wait until I show you the enchanting effect of Asgardian mead.”

“Sounds illegal enough to try it.”

Night had fallen and they had retreated to some of the lower stories of the house – one of the few halfway intact buildings around, if you could call anything here 'intact'. Again, carpets, curtains and other soft objects they had found had been arranged to a makeshift bed, in between dust and ruined furniture.
Although still uncomfortable, Tony's body had slowly adjusted to arrangements of that sort. Surprisingly, he slept much better than he had in his king sized bed back in the mansion, which probably did not have anything to do with the location or the arrangements, but with the person sleeping next to him.

It was different that night, though. At some point, Tony drifted out of a dreamless slumber, after the thoughts about Loki's past, about Thanos and about what had happened in between all those glimpses the god had told him, had eventually ceased again. Still, his sleep was uneasy and not deep. He was not entirely awake, but also not able to fall asleep completely. Something was unnerving him, waking him up again and again, but only after lying still for a couple of minutes, he noticed what was wrong.

Loki was not there. The spot where the god had been resting was cold and empty, with no trace left.

“Loki?”, Tony asked into the darkness, his voice a strange sound in between the stone walls. There was no answer and the inventor was wide awake within the next second, sitting up and pulling himself to his feet, his limbs stiff from the cold air in the room. Although it was very unlikely that that something had happened to the god without him noticing, Tony felt how panic clawed itself into his chest, pressing down on his heart and lungs.

Except for the glow of his reactor from under his pullover, it was entirely black around him, no city lights shining through the windows, the sky black under layers of ominous smog.

“Loki!”, he tried again, louder this time, yelling.

There was a faint rustle, then he noticed something moving on the stairwell that lead up to the roof. He froze for a split-second, turning his head to the noise, but his human eyes were incapable of making out who it was.

“Tony? What are you doing? Why are you awake?”

Relief washed over him, but was quickly replaced by annoyance. When he answered, he sounded a little more pissed than he was:

“What were you doing? Why were you on the roof?”

“I have to show you something.”

With that, Loki's silhouette vanished again like he was one of those oh so mysterious vampires or something. Tony stood there, frozen to the spot, feeling the cold creep through his clothes. Then, with a muttered curse, he gave in to his curiosity and followed the god, although only reluctantly.

A violent shiver ran through his body when the freezing air from outside hit him and he clutched his arms around his chest.

“I hope you have a good reason for dragging me out into the cold in the middle of the night.”

Loki was standing at the edge of the roof, staring into the distance. At first, Tony thought that the god was only watching the landscape – again – but then he gestured him to come closer, seemingly unable to turn his gaze from whatever he was seeing there.

“I found them.”
A sudden wave of hot adrenalin rushed through his veins and made his chest tighten in anticipation and quickly, he adjusted his eyes to look where Loki was pointing at. Could it be...?

The god's finger was pointing North, at the horizon. He could not see anything at first and he tapped closer, angry at himself why he had not put on his boots. Yet, he did not see anything, still, and with every second he spent in the cold night air his mood decreased, wondering whether Loki was already daring to make bad jokes.

Then, he noticed it.

There was a glow at the horizon, defining the line where sky met earth and shining even beyond. It was definitely not caused by human civilization and Tony felt reminded of numerous alien movies he had already seen in his life. The cold, purplish glow became brighter for him to see the more he concentrated on it and his eyes adjusted to the poor conditions.

He felt his excitement grow, successfully drowning every feeling of moody drowsiness which had been there before. There was no doubt in what they saw.

“And we almost missed them...”, Tony mumbled, “Fucking bastards.”

Apparently, they would have their battle after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be up on Friday or Saturday!

And hello to all the new subscribers! :3

And check out this fanart for chapter 35, made by Batwynn!

Please give us a comment, if you've got the time. It means a lot to us and helps to keep the motivation up :)
Chapter Notes

Gore warning for this chapter...although I don't think that this is necessary, if you have read the story up to this point xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although they were still half a mile away, Loki could smell them.

Their abominable stench was hanging in the air like a thick cloud, carried over to the two hidden watchers with the wind – it filled Loki's nose and mouth, reawakening his hunger for blood and death within him.

He had waited so long for this moment, and now, they were so close...

Oh - he would show these disgusting monstrosities what a real god was capable of!

He would burn them all to the ground, nothing but ashes would remind of their existence when he was done. Loki felt unstoppable and his magic was boiling savagely within him - every effort to keep it contained would have been in vain.

The god's hands were entirely covered with the blinding blue fire which was slowly crawling up his lower arms, consuming more and more of him. The foreign energy inside of him was as eager as Loki was himself, fueling his own lusting for death.

Fortunately, Tony was walking only close behind, so Loki was spared to endure his disapproving stare. The mortal had other concerns, anyway - Loki knew that he too could barely anticipate the battle.

He would finally have the revenge for his woman he had so grimly pursued, the original reason why he had chosen to follow Loki in the first place.

Both of them had departed directly after they had seen the illuminated sky from the rooftop, Tony's lack of sleep and the vicious cold obviously forgotten in the presence of the enemy. The only reason they were sneaking up on the Chitauri and not rushing onto the field to wipe them from existence in one stroke, was that neither of them wanted their mission to be jeopardized through unforeseen events.

Not after they had come so far.

Unlike other times, Tony had his faceplate closed, whatever expression he wore now hidden behind the indifferent mask. Loki had warned him, for he had better knowledge of the Chitauri's weapons than anybody else in this realm.

Their arsenal covered a lot more than mere energy guns. Concerning the ways to bring death to other species, the Chitauri's imagination was almost unlimited: they used different kind of mines, as well as poison-gas with nasty effects on your health; sometimes, they drew on static fields, lethal for the fragile organism of a human.

It was out of the question that they would not meet any resistance at all, never they would leave an entire ship unprotected.

That was what they had found – a gigantic mothership.
In hindsight, Loki wondered how it was even possible that they had almost given up, had he not noticed the strange glow at the horizon. Attempted to hide it behind a shallow hill, the ship had landed a fair way off the city center, yet now, as they were barely a few hundred feet away from it, it was impossible to miss.

On the contrary:
The outlandish-appearing complex of strange metals and heavy machinery was dominating the entire landscape like a mountain-range, emitting its strange purplish light in bright rays. It had been positioned in what looked like the outer parts of the suburbs, or at least the remains of it – there was nothing left beside a few walls where once buildings had been. Everything seemed abandoned, no living movement to be seen at first sight.

The sight of destroyed and abandoned cities had become common for them by now, but this time, it was different. The Chitauri apparently had given up their politics of hiding – there was nobody here to hide from. Although you did not see one of the beasts directly, they left their unmistakable traces all over the place:
Dead humans, lots and lots of them, corpses that were barely more than skeletons, scattered on the streets like rubbish. There were also fresh ones, probably killed only recently, parts of them severely mutilated, others killed and then never touched again.

Loki could not imagine that these humans had survived on their own accord for such a long time, but neither did he want to think about the other alternative. He had experienced himself what it meant to be a prisoner of the Chitauri, but he had a strong physique and mind – he did not want to think about the horrors those unfortunate humans must had endured.

Behind him, Tony was still walking in silence, although he too must had seen what Loki was seeing. The god knew from experience, that the other's unusually vehement silence meant nothing good for the aliens.

Then, after what felt like an agonizing long march, he saw the first Chitauri.

Loki froze immediately, then quickly moved sidewards to hide behind a wall and motioned for Tony to do the same. The mortal closed up on him from behind and took a look over his shoulder.

Neither of them said a word for a few moments while they stared onto the creature in the distance. Then, a second and a third one appeared, following after the first and then disappearing out of their sight behind a wall. They were on watch, obviously.

“What the fuck are they still doing there?”, Tony eventually mumbled, his low voice sounding strange through the suits speakers.

Loki was lost in thoughts for a few moments, his eyes still roaming over the spot where they had just seen the Chitauri. He too could not figure out exactly why the aliens had chosen this place to stay, and furthermore, what they could possibly be planning. Whatever plan it was, they would never come to realize it anyway.

They were not close enough to the ship yet for a clear view onto the area directly surrounding it, but from the gut-wrenching smell he could assume that there were plenty of them, both inside the metal construct and around it. A rush of excitement ran through his veins and down his spine, letting the bluish fire flare up in an
intense white glow for a few seconds.

“They are many, probably thousands if we count those inside the ship. The more the better, right?”

Loki regarded the human with a wolfish grin, yet was only met with the cold stare of the iron mask and so, the god continued:

“If we want to kill all of them and take down their ship, we have to destroy the main computer inside. Their swarm's coordination functions through it and the moment it will stop sending a signal, they will all be killed by the chips connected to their brain-stem.”

“Pretty convenient.”

“It's to ensure that no one of them is caught after a lost battle. Their leaders hate deserters and traitors.”

“Still convenient.”

They were both silent for another moment, until a movement not so far away made them both remember that they were not in the safety of an abandoned cellar anymore, but in close proximity to a hostile base.

It was time to move, time to start the battle they had been waiting for months now.

“I fly ahead and sound the bell for our party - I have just the right thing for that.”

Loki knew this to be the couple of missiles stored in his suit. Tony had explained them to him in all detail and the god could not think of a more fitting prelude. The Chitauri would be blown into pieces before they would even know what had hit them.

“Alright, fly ahead. We meet at the center of the ship.”

There were no further words, no goodbyes or reassurances exchanged. No kind words to promise each other's healthy return – they did not need that, not yet. This was only the beginning, and neither of them was going to die today.

Loading from one to hundred percent within a second, Tony rushed past Loki like a fiery blue comet, into the sky and out of sight. A moment later, the shock wave of several evenly spread detonations ripped through the abandoned town, and not seconds later, everything was tainted in the hot glow of fire. Like a swarm of birds, the Chitauri's screeching arose over the plain, drowned by the sound of smaller detonations from further afar. Energy bolts fired from guns on ground-level, shot into the dark nocturnal sky above, all of them missing their aim.

It was beautiful.

Finally, the moment had come. The moment where he could give those disgusting little creatures what they deserved, the moment where he could unleash the power that had been burning inside him, without having to restrain. He had wiped out almost an entire species before - this time, there would be no one to hold him back.

Arms bright aflame with the Tesseract's blue fire, Loki leaped out of his hiding place and ran towards the origin of the battle. His mind tainted from a feverish, uncontrolled haze, he shut out all thoughts which were not necessary to fight.
The first group of aliens that crossed his path was torn apart by a magic shock-wave before they were even close enough to see him, leaving nothing but a purplish mush behind. The second group faced its death just a moment later, their ugly bodies engulfed by flames that burned them alive. Loki did not even wait long enough to see them die – there were still enough of them to rip apart.

The god moved further forward, deeper into what seemed to be the Chitauri’s outpost.

The area was full with the strange structures Loki remembered as their buildings, looking strangely organic and machine-like at the same time. Now, it did not matter much anyway. The flames from Tony’s attack were already taking over great parts of the structures, working through the alien material, melting away every trace of its existence.

A movement from the corner of his vision caught Loki’s attention. Three Chitauri-soldiers had attempted to sneak up on him, spears ready to fire and Loki whirled around just fast enough. The first energy bolt managed to graze Loki’s side – a superficial wound, healed within seconds – the next two were reflected by the magic shield he rose around himself for protection.

A dry chuckle escaped the god, then he leaped forward, just grabbing what he could get hold of on the one closest, which happened to be its throat. With a sharp, nasty sound, it was torn away from its body, the ripped carotids spilling dark blood all over Loki and the two other aliens who quickly shared their comrades fate. The head of the first was crushed by the force of a magic blast, the other left his life in the attempt to help his comrade when the god simply grabbed his weapon and ripped off his arms with it.

Loki went on without looking back, leaving the alien to bleed out on the ground.

Louder fighting noises were coming from a spot closer to the ship, drawing his attention. Guttural shouting coming from the Chitauri and the unmistakable noise Loki knew belonged to Tony’s repulsors. Sometimes, he could see flashes of light where the repulsor beams made a hit, then he saw the trail of the Mark Omega’s thrusters flashing. The god was pretty sure that Tony had everything under control. Loki would stick to the plan and move forward to the center of the ship, to their agreed meeting point.

Yet, just when Loki was about to move forward towards the gigantic complex of machinery, something made him stop. A shiver ran through the ground, causing a strange vibration in his body, closely followed by an intense tremor that almost threw him off his feet. Loki's head whirled around to the source of the vibration, but then had to avert his face to protect himself.

All fighting noises were drowned by the deafening sound which suddenly filled the air around, a sudden, rapid heat seemed to set the surroundings on fire. The change of air-pressure came without warning and was, even for him, nauseating. It took the god a few seconds to return from the shock induced by the sensory overload.

When he looked up again, he could not believe his eyes.

“Worthless cowards...”, Loki hissed when he realized what exactly was happening, his voice unheard in the roaring of turbines and the buildings collapsing around him.

The entire ship had started to move. Its purplish glow intensified from the light of its reawakened engines, it looked like a giant city of sheer unthinkable weight, slowly taking off.
For a ship of this size, it seemed impossible, but it lifted itself into the air almost effortlessly, digging deep cracks into the earth while doing so.

Apparently, the Chitauri had come to the conclusion that they could not take on this sudden assault, or maybe they had something on their ship that was not meant to be found. Whatever it was, Loki would not allow it.

He started running immediately, determined to be able to reach the ship before it would be gone.

From the distance, he saw several dozen Chitauri climbing onto their small air-crafts, and he changed his direction mid-running. When they noticed him, their movements became panicky, but they were fast enough to take off towards the ship before he reached them – except for one.

With a hazardous jump, Loki managed to get a hold on one of the hovercrafts and climbed onto it with quick movements.

One fluid motion and he broke the Chitauri’s neck, but had no chance to take over the steering – the second the Chitauri dropped dead, the engine died and the entire machine dropped out of the air like a rock.

Loki fell onto his side and scrambled to his feet as fast as he could, cursing at the unmoving vehicle.

The ship, meanwhile, had gained speed and separated itself from the ground entirely, hovering above the wrecked city.

It was still close enough to be reached through the Iron Man suit, easily, but when he looked around, Loki could not see Tony anywhere.

There was only cracked stone, fire and-

He had not seen it coming when something hit him from behind - he had not even heard its footsteps approaching.

A second later, he found himself tossed to the ground by a heavy body, the only thing he could make out was a blur of gray skin and sharp teeth, as the biting smell of rotten flesh made him gasp - not even his magic could enable him to react fast enough.

Sharp claws dug into his chest, pressing him down - then a whole set of sharp teeth sunk into his side.

He was overwhelmed by pain flooding his body, unendurable, incomprehensible and Loki could not hold back an agonized scream.

The sharp-toothed jaw closed with predatory force and with a ripping sound, he felt the flesh caught between the fangs torn from his body.

Blood spilled onto the ground beneath – not the purplish blood of aliens, but the dark red of Asgardian blood.

For a short moment, the pain was too much to bear, even for him, and the only thing he could do was screaming, his whole being turned to just one aim: make it stop.

So, at the same time, the still working part of Loki's mind knew that this short moment was the only chance to get away from whatever had attacked him. As long as it was eating, swallowing what it had just bitten out of him, it would not go in for another bite.

Ignoring the pain, only driven by the sheer instinct to survive, Loki scrambled backwards, away from the beast. On all four at first, then back onto his feet, to turn around and run towards a nearby house, behind which he sought shelter.

Breath going haggard, uneven, his heart beating rapidly and at an unsteady pace, he felt how hot
blood spilled over the ground around him, soaked his remaining clothes and left a red smear on the wall behind him. It was too much, all too much, the blood-loss was too immense to cope with.

Unable to keep himself standing straight, Loki slid down the wall into a sitting position.

His shaky vision became a bit better once he was on the ground, so he examined the wound on his side, barely able to stop his hands from shivering.
Where once had been his waist, from the end of his ribcage down to his pelvis, now only was a gaping bloody mess. Impossible to define what was muscle and what belonged to his intestines, there was too much blood coming out.

Loki tried to steady his breathing.

Everything was fine. He still had his magic, he could still heal himself. Loki repeated thee facts in his head, so that his heart would calm down its racing pace. The thing had not damaged his spine, had not ripped out the implants.
The magic was still there, the Tesseract's powers still his. Everything was fine.

He did not have a lot of time, though, he had to hurry up - and the pain was still so strong...

The trickster inhaled deeply, then let his magic flow. The wound was covered in blue light when it spread out to repair the damage, the tissue shifted and expanded, rapidly growing back to its original state.
Still, it was not fast enough.
With a feral howl, the creature that had attacked him shot around the corner of the house Loki had been hiding behind, stopping only a few feet away from him. Now, that they were eye to eye, the thing did not dare to attack Loki directly.

He had not seen anything like it before, but he was sure that it definitely belonged to the creatures originating from the Chitauri world.
The gray skin, yellow eyes and strange metal plating were indication enough, as well as the huge, blood-soiled teeth. Yet, he had never seen one of their smaller beasts and so the four-legged appearance with its sharp claws and long body was something entirely new for him. As well as the size - the beast, whatever it was meant to be, had the size of a large horse, the claws alone big enough to behead him with one swipe.

A loud growl emerged from the beast's throat, then it leaped forward.
Loki dodged the attack in the last moment, wincing from the pain his side was causing him. The creature's hesitation had given him some time to recover, but it had not been enough for the wound to heal entirely.

He had just one chance of survival: kill the creature before it even had the chance to get a hold of him again.
Loki gathered the magic on his hands, the withdrawal from the healing process immediately causing the pain flare up anew through his side. The god ground his teeth and concentrated, letting the extinguished blue flames flare brightly again until they started to take on a form.

A long dagger of blue light manifested in his right hand, glowing bright with the same otherworldly fire, its edges sharp and defined and able to slice the beast's throat with ease.

The ugly thing had turned around again and gathered his energy for another attack. This time, he did not dodge it, but jumped right into its direction, only ducking in the last moment.
He felt how claws grazed along his back, tearing deep slices into his flesh, but he had managed to get to the spot he had been aiming for – right under the creature's neck. His hand shot upwards and
the smell of scorched flesh filled the air when the dagger cut through the skin right under the creature's jaw, down to the collarbone.

A desperate, gurgling sound left the animal's mouth and it started thrashing frantically. Yet, when Loki pulled the weapon back and took a leap to the side and out of the beast's reach, it was already too late. With its entire neck cut open like the belly of a dead fish, it could not do much more than make a few desperate screeches before it fell to the ground. The trachea ripped apart and hanging out of the wound in a bloody mess, his fate was to bleed out quickly, twitching ungracefully until the last trace of life had vanished from its body.

The dagger in Loki's hand dissolved, along with the blue magic that had engulfed his hands. His magic reserves had barely been grazed by this use, but strangely, Loki felt drained to the core. He felt deadly tired, burned out and exhausted like he had been fighting for weeks. The feeling did not cease, not even after the healing process was completed and all of his wounds closed as if they had never been there.

There was a painful pounding in his head and his body felt hyperthermic, like he had a fever. Where blue glowing fire had engulfed his lower arms before, it now felt as if someone was sticking hot blades into the flesh.

Loki knew very well where this pain originated from, but there was no time to do anything about it right now.

A look up told him that he had to move on – there was still a ship to take down, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if Loki's encounter with the Chitauri-Hunter belongs into the category 'unnecessary animal deaths and violence' or not. Anyway, it was fun to write.

Comments are always very much appreciated :D
Tony was on fire – not literally, though (these little fuckers were not fast enough for that), but on the inside. He was untouchable, invincible up here in the air, with Chitauri down on the ground, their lousy energy beams not aimed well enough to even as much as graze him. They were nothing but small dots on the HUD, red lights that would be wiped out of existence in a matter of seconds.

Tony ordered Jarvis to launch the missiles imbedded in his suit, little fireworks that rushed towards the ground and turned it into a blinding inferno of red and orange. There were not even screeches, no panicked death-screams. The aliens were simply blasted into pieces, dead and burned to ash before they even knew what had hit them.

It almost felt like Gulmira again. Tony's heart was racing, he could hear his heartbeat loud in his ears, but this was not panic. No, this time it was the sheer excitement of a battle he knew his enemies could not win, a battle that would sate his thirst for revenge and craving for justice. He would make this little fuckers pay – pay for everything they had done to him, for the life they had taken from him.

There was nothing that could stop Tony now. He was a storm of fire, metal and light, death from above.

He stayed up in the air, abstained from getting engaged in any fights on the ground. He had the advantage of perspective, the ability to overlook everything what happened down there, and the foot-soldiers had no chance to reach him.

Once he had used a good part of his ammunition to turn the ground beneath into a raging hell of fire and burning bodies, Tony started using his repulsor blasts to destroy every gray creature that dared to get under Jarvis' radar. Never would that have been possible with one of his old suits, not from this height, but the blue energy beams of the Mark Omega reached the ground even from a distance of several hundred feet, erupting in a blue explosion that ripped the Chitauri apart as if there were nothing but a rotten tomatoes.

Of course, it could not go on like this – that would have been to easy. It would not have been worth the effort Tony had put into the creation of his new suit.

It would be no fun.

In the last moment, Jarvis informed Tony that Chitauri on hovercrafts were rapidly approaching, claiming his monopoly of the airspace. He had just enough time to let himself fall down several feet to dodge the energy blasts shot from their vehicles.

Their blasts were stronger and the hovercrafts more agile that the foot-soldiers, but still: it was nothing he could not handle. There were no big advancements to the machines, they were still the same he had fought back in New York, the same he had cleared the sky from with ease. The only differences now would be to his advantage.

One order the five hovercrafts closing in on him from above were marked in bright red on his
screen, easy to spot on the dark sky above. One after another, within a row of fast and well-aimed repulsor-blasts, they were nothing but burning metal and flesh falling from the sky.

Fuck, this felt way too good!

This, right this, was the reason why he had chosen to follow Loki in the first place, this exact feeling. His grim lust for vengeance had turned into a much sicker delight. Yes, he enjoyed having this power over his enemies, to see them suffer through what he had created out of nothing. He would make them suffer like he had suffered.

No. They would fucking burn.

Only faintly, Tony noticed a strange sound and it took him a while to understand that it was he who was causing it. A dark, spiteful chuckle, full of something he had not known from himself before. He was actually amused, he was laughing at the destruction he was causing. The moment he realized that he was not even disgusted with himself caused a violent panic for a split-second, but it receded quickly. It was not useful any longer. His former self would have been disgusted, ashamed even - but that former self had been a delusional idiot and right now, Tony did not really give a shit whether he was going crazy or not.

It felt good like this. It felt good to wipe out any trace of alien life on the ground with nothing but a blast of light. It felt good to feel the skull of a Chitauri on a hovercraft being crushed under the pressure of his fist. It felt fucking amazing.

He was so absorbed in what he was doing, that when the ship suddenly started to ascend, Tony was baffled for a second too long.

While he was hanging motionlessly mid-air, staring at the impossibly huge construction lift itself from the ground without any visible engine whatsoever, an energy ray hit him from behind. He was whirled forwards in a few involuntary somersaults, then managed to find his balance again just before he hit ground. Yet, he barely had the time to turn around and face his attacker, when suddenly the next beam hit his head from the side.

His vision and the image of his HUD mixed into an unhealthy blur and his ears rang, rendering him unable to react to the next hit following right after. Tony crashed to the ground, but managed to stay on his feet, quickly rising his arms to shield himself from incoming hits. Above and around him still was the all-drowning noise of the ascending mothership, fortunately partly blocked out by his helmet. When the static vanished and the screen cleared again, he could make out 5 Chitauri closing in on him with their weapons risen, ready to strike him down.

They looked in a hurry, though, and when the inventor followed their nervous glances, he could see why: their comrades were leaving, hovercrafts were shooting into the air like a departing swarm of harmful locusts. Torn between the threat of being left down here and the opportunity to kill their enemy, they had decided to go in for the kill – a noble gesture, but wasted.

He did not have the time for an extensive fight – he could not let this ship leave.

Almost simultaneously with what seemed their leader, he rose his repulsor for a blast, sending one of them right into Chitauri-heaven and another at least down to the ground where he belonged. The
beam from the alien's energy-weapon grazed his side, another hit the ground next to him as he activated his thrusters to rush forward.

He flew right into their leader, taking him with him to the ground where he lost his weapon, before Tony rolled around to use his body as a shield. The Chitauri was penetrated by two lethal hits from his comrades, his screeching scream unheard in the noise around.

Without standing up first, the genius fired a string of repulsor blasts at the two remaining aliens who vanished behind the bright blue beams of light until the revolting scent of their scorched flesh mixed into the overall aroma of battle.

When Tony scrambled to his feet again, their two bodies dropped dead to the mud. In the background, he saw the last survivor of the group flee towards one of the hovercrafts which reminded him of what little time he had for standing around like that.

“Ah, shit!”, he cursed, then blasted off again.

The ground was clearing from Chitauri faster and faster, leaving only the dead and the wounded. Yet, even with the enemy half-escaped, Tony's eyes remained focused downwards – he was looking for something else.

Somebody, to be precise.

“Where the fuck are you, Loki...?”, he muttered to himself, having Jarvis search for his energy signature behind the walls of ruins and under crashed hovercrafts.

He could not see the blue of his magic anywhere, no place where the aliens were disturbed in their tactical retreat which could give a hint upon the god's whereabouts. Also, as it looked, he did not seem to be on the ship already – and Tony would not enter the ship without him.

However, the ship was gaining speed and the time ran out for them, most of the Chitauri were already on board again, leaving the few remaining ones as easy targets. A passing hovercraft was sent tumbling back down to earth after the alien on it had unwisely provoked his attention by attacking him and just when Tony was about to descend to earth completely again, Jarvis scored a hit.

“Six o`clock, behind the former Café, but he is moving quickly.”

“Thanks, already got him.”

Mid-movement, he stopped and turned, then shot down to the ground like a kamikaze fighter. He could see the god now, too, running after the ship like his life depended on it. Tony just shook his head with a faint grin, then rushed past him right over his head, turning the volume of his speakers up.

“Run, Forest, run!”

He was too fast to see the reaction, but he could imagine Loki’s facial expression to be one of confusion and annoyance and, hopefully, at least a bit of relief for Tony to finally appear. A wide swerve a hundred feet behind the god, then he came back with doubled speed, closing in on Loki from behind.

The other had stopped and was just about to turn around and look at him, when he was already grabbed under his arms by the metallic hands of Iron Man and rapidly diverged from the ground with roughly 90 mp/h.

“You got all that magic shit on your hands and you still have me giving you lifts – don't pretend you don't like it.”
Loki returned quickly from being paralyzed by shock into his usual state and clung onto the metallic plates of the suit without looking like he would give a single fuck. Tony saw his mouth moving as he gave an answer, probably something slightly irritated, but the words were lost in the wind, since they were closing in on the ship and the noise was getting louder. He decided just to assume that Loki was okay with his ride and the next step of the plan: Get onto that ship.

From the outside, the massive complex looked almost impenetrable. Although he managed to identify certain components, Jarvis failed to give names to almost 20% of the alloy used in the outer walls of the ship, neither did he see any open entrance they could have used. The aliens had returned to the alleged safety of their mothership, obviously with enough trust in the machine's stability that they did not bother any longer to attack the enemy outside. It was either arrogance or ignorance of what he was capable of, yet the inventor was determined to let them pay for both of it.

It took less than a minute for his sensors to locate the spot where the outer wall was thinnest.

“You ready?!”

A glance down told him that Loki apparently was ready, nodding with a grim enthusiasm, his eyes already fixated on the right spot in the ships outside. Something about his look distracted Tony for a second, something haunted engraved in his otherwise hard features that did not quite match the situation. He could not make sense of it, though, and had it forgotten already when he loaded the energy of his repulsor up to 148%, right until his arm started vibrating from the enormous power pulsing through the the wiring.

When he let go, the beam's backlash threw him off-balance for a moment, the detonation that followed was even more powerful. For what he had needed several blasts with one of the former models of his suit, the Mark Omega wiped out a truck-sized piece of wall with one blow. When the dust was blown away by the raging airflow, Chitauri were dragged along with it, some of them severely scorched or pierced by large pieces of metal. They had no chance to get a hold on something and so, their bodies descended to the ground, their screeches barely audible.

The hole he had blown was melting on its edges, small flames leaking out here and there, but they had no time to marvel – there were already blasts of the Chitauri's energy weapons were coming form inside, firing blindly in the distance.

“I bring us in, you wipe them out. Let's go!”

With that, he started his thrusters and rushed straight-forward into the hole, dropping Loki somewhere over the floor. As soon as the god met solid ground again, he got up with an almost artistic roll and yanked up his arms in one fluid movement. The few Chitauri who had survived the detonation burst into clouds of bloody droplets, parts of skin, muscle and bone splattering to the ground, almost immediately drawn outside from the airflow. Tony had already moved behind a corner, away from the piping wind when Loki hurried after him.

For a second, they were alone – but this would not last long.

“Tony, listen to me. We have to separate, otherwise it will not work out. We have to bring this ship down as fast as possible.”
The engineer only nodded, the display which showed the momentary air-pressure indicating that opening his face-plate here would not be very smart. Again, he was amazed that Loki could simply talk and breathe like that, but there was not the time to have a little chat about this right now.

“I will destroy their central computing system to kill the Chitauri, but you have to go for the engine. The ship has to crash before it leaves this area.”

“You get the nerdy computer stuff and the only thing I do is blow up some engines? Not fair.”, Tony said, yet had already decided that Loki was right.

Even if they killed the Chitauri right away, the ship would be leaderless, crashing into whatever poor flyover state they were just hovering above. It would probably kill more people than they had killed Chitauri until now – it would be a catastrophe.

“See you in a bit. Pro-tip: Careful with their blood - it doesn't really wash out.”

Loki - already covered in thick, slimy Chitauri blood from head to toe, his hoodie torn to almost unrecognizable shreds - just gave him a vague grin, but before he could give a proper return, running footsteps could be heard. Both of their heads turned towards the heavy door on the other end of the corridor they were in, then Tony made a step forward.

“I take those. Off you go!”

It was just when the door opened with a low whirring noise that Loki had disappeared through another one on the opposite direction. Tony took a deep breath, then he started to fire.

The room was blindingly bright from energy rays and the fire of impact, Chitauri weapons exploding when hit by a repulsor beam, destroying their wielders arms and whole upper bodies. There were hordes of them, sent to protect their ship from the intruders, but all of them just sent to their death.

The first rows already started to thin out, forcing the following to scramble over the growing pile of their comrades' dead bodies.

Tony just fired, each splashing sound when Chitauri armor and skin was torn to pieces pushed him further into a state of grim delight.

His blood was pumping through his veins, his expression strained but looking almost pleased in its concentration, in the destruction he waged upon those disgusting creatures which had destroyed every meaning he had thought to have found in life.

No, there was new meaning. A plain and simple one - certainly not applicable in the long run, but all the more satisfying.

Soon, the aliens learned and took cover from his furious attack, cowering behind the bodies to gain advantage and shoot from a safer place – but Tony was having none of that. It took ridiculously short 2.3 seconds to load the unibeam.

Like the terrible force of a tsunami, its blinding light raged through the entire corridor, burning whatever was in its way. There was nothing alive when he dared to open his eyes again and the walls of the corridor were lurid orange, melting and sizzling from the heat, thick pieces of molten metal dropping from the ceiling.

A predatory grin appeared on Tony's face.

“Nice one.”
He did not hesitate any longer, but set off. In front of his eyes, the inner architecture of the ship constructed as a hologram, showing the little red dots swarming in on him from all sides. Panic inducing, perhaps, but he was beyond anything like that. There was nothing which would stop him now and when the first vanguard of the next wave of Chitauri broke through the door to his left, they looked into the deadly light of his repulsor.

On his path through the ship's twisted aisles he left behind a trail of blood-smeared walls, molten metal and the all-penetrating stench of burned flesh. Even inside his suit, the smell made him cringe in disgust.

They could send as many of those ratty beasts as they liked: inside the narrow corridors, he always knew where they came from and they always came out on the short end. It was such a tragedy, really - and his suit did not even have as much as a fucking dent yet. His ammunition was almost entirely spent, but he was still running on over 137% of his energy.

Wherever Loki was – and he was certain he was doing just fine - Tony was already only a few corners from the turbine hall.

The turbines were only a guess, since the vague forms from the hologram did not give away very much, but there had to be something keeping this ship flying. Whatever it was he would find in there, he would set it aflame and watch the explosion from a distance. He already regretted not having brought popcorn or something, because until now, this had been a total breeze.

Even the Chitauri seemed to have noticed this: for a few minutes now, the ordinance seemed to have been stopped. The red dots on his screen kept a respectful distance, but the inventor did not take that as a good sign.

They were plotting something – but they would not be fast enough to stop him.

“Sir, change in oxygen-concentration. I suggest a gas, invading from the ventilation system.”

There it was, like they could mind-read. It had not even needed Jarvis to announce it, because from one second to another, Tony was practically blind.

Thick smoke filled the whole room and then, the red dots, formerly keeping their distance, suddenly darted in on him.

“Son of a bitch.”, Tony cursed to none in particular, then the first beam hit him right in the side.

He staggered backwards as the sharp pain made him gasp, but then there was a movement in the periphery of his vision and he whirled around, barely able to block the blow of a heavy weapon. His lips escaped a pissed-off groan, then he pushed back against the weight to ram the Chitauri into the next wall.

The creature wielding it was nothing more than a blurred massive figure in all that dust, forcing him into the sort of time-consuming fist-fight he had been able to avoid the whole time.

Reaching into the dusty nothingness, he felt what he grabbed was the beast's ugly face, in the next second bursting into a mush of cerebral matter from the repulsor beam.

Yet, the next blow did not give him any time to smirk and he saw that there were coming even more of them. He could only guess their exact position, could, even with Jarvis' help, only aim at what was within eye-sight and for that, he had to allow them to come close.

Too close to be safe.

Like they had smelled his weak-point, they were swarming towards him now. Tony found himself on the back foot faster than he had imagined a minute before - the turbine hall, so fucking close, was getting out of reach with every second.

Suddenly, Tony found the increasing number of those damned red dots was actually very panic-
Chapter End Notes

Tony....Tony? Are you allright? (The Dark!Tony tag is justified now... we think... hope... wuat?)

Comments please? You would totally make our day :D
The first message Steve received was nothing but a vibration on his phone. Usually, these things occurred quite often in the 21st century – nothing special and easily ignored. Especially, when one was currently occupied with the task of putting his wet and freshly cleaned laundry out to dry. Yet, the sound continued and repeated itself several times, until he finally gave in and dried his hands on his jeans with an unnerved sigh, so that he could take a look at the annoying device SHIELD had given him.

A moment later he wished to have earlier. The laundry was immediately forgotten when he stormed out of the yard back into the house.

Inside, he already saw Bruce hurrying down the stairs, meeting in the living room with Clint and Natasha. The archer looked slightly strange, his bow and arrows already in place while he was still wearing jeans and t-shirt.

Natasha was just putting her hair in a bun – they were preparing for battle.

Thor was the last one to arrive, but since he already wore his full battle-armor – as the only one of them – nobody said a word.

"The ship is approaching from the East, already going over 600 mph, speed increasing. We will take the Quinjet, no time to change clothes. Grab your shield, Cap."

Clint threw a smug grin at Bruce.

"Good thing that at least one can remain in civvies."

The scientist had nothing but a nervous smile as an answer, and a second later, they were hurrying out of the house to the Quinjet, everyone preparing their weapons more or less clumsily while running.

The Quinjet – Steve really did not want to know where the two assassins had got the machine from, the only thing he knew was that it was an older model – was hidden under a large tarpaulin, right behind the house.

Fortunately, Steve's house was situated a bit remote and until now, nobody had ever said a word about the curious machine in the backyard. Although he had never commented the probably stolen machine, it bothered him that the heavy jet had left deep tiremarks in his garden... well, no they were lucky that they had it.

Clint and Natasha were the first to enter, already taking in their well-practiced positions in the cockpit, while Steve, Thor and Bruce took the seats in the back of the machine. When the engines started to roar, Steve clawed his fingers in his shield.

It was his first battle since he got Tony out of his mansion months ago - if you could even call it a battle – and despite the eager anticipation he felt, he had a bad feeling about it, even though this time, he was not alone.

The only one looking like he would rather be somewhere completely else right now was Bruce who was silently kneading his hands in his lap. Steve could only imagine too well what it was like to be dragged in a battle you actually did not want to fight in.

In a matter of minutes, the scientist would have to be forced to take on a form he feared –
something he had avoided as long as possible.

The Quinjet did not have any windows to look outside, except, of course, the ones in the front, so they could not be sure how far they had come and where they were. There were no further information of the exact nature of the attack – if it was an attack after all. They did not know about the ship's size, or who was waiting inside and it only fueled the tensed anticipation in all of them.

"Do you think they are heading for LA this time?"

Clint asked, not addressing anyone in particular. There was a short moment of silence, in which one could only hear the faint rushing noise of the turbines outside, and surprisingly, it was Bruce who answered first.

"They always attack the areas with the densest population."

"So, we have to stop them before they come too close."

Thor was the only one of them who sounded honestly excited about the upcoming fight. For him, it seemed like a personal commitment to win this battle, however small or big it might be – you could tell from the look in his eyes that he was tired of losing battles.

"I would suggest Bruce and Thor attack from outside, while we stay in the Quinjet and try to blast our way inside.", Natasha announced.

"Shouldn't we already be close? I can't see anything."

They had left the city behind already, a matter of minutes in a plane as fast as one of SHIELD's Quinjets. Now, everything beneath them was the silent back-country of California, bordering to Nevada, a desert-like surrounding. Possibly the best place for a fight.

Steve had stood up to look over Clint's shoulder, unable to keep calm enough to sit. He knew that the ship was not far away anymore, since its shape was already visible on the radar. Yet, when he looked out of the window and searched the hazy blue desert-sky with his eyes, there was nothing indicating something as conspicuous as an alien ship.

"Guys, look at that!"

With obvious excitement, Clint pointed his outstretched finger towards the sky at something high up in the atmosphere – something Steve still did not see. He stared harder, knowing that the archer's eye-sight was better than his own.

Then, he saw it.

From their position nothing but a dark, blurred shape, it slowly became obvious that the thing they were searching for was right above them. Behind him, the others had risen from their seats as well, staring up at the gigantic shape above.

"I didn't imagine it to be that big.", Bruce mumbled meekly.

"It's too high. We can't reach it with the Quinjet. We would run out of oxygen before we would come close enough to even fire a single shot."

"Let me fly ahead, I will bring it down."
"Stop talking nonsense, Thor, you can't do that alone.", Steve objected, earning himself a irritated look from the Thundergod.

“We don't have another choice. We can't fly up there, and we can't let it move on like that. Thor is our only chance.", Natasha threw in, engaging into the discussion.

“This won't help us at all. Thor alone won't be enough! God or not, he can't take down an entire ship on his own!”

“With all due respect, Steve Rogers, but a wound acquired in battle does not make an Asgardian unfit to fight. Have faith in my strength as I have faith in yours.”

“That's not what I mean and you know it!”

The discussion went on, getting messier and louder with every comment which was thrown in, almost drowning Clint's remark when he first uttered it.

“Guys. Guys!!”

It was only the slight panic and upset that eventually made them stop in their shouting, directing all their gazes towards the sky.

What had only been a small dot in the distance before, now had grown into a dark sun-blocking mass of machinery. Outlandish, a gigantic geometrical form which was slowly descending towards the ground.

No, descending was not the right word – it was falling.

Only now, they could see the flames blazing at the backside, where the engines had apparently been destroyed. The ship was already drawing a line of thick black smoke over the sky and only with a violent twist of the steering device, Natasha could prevent from flying right into it.

Nobody uttered a word, though.

From a safe distance, there was nothing else to do than watch in awe. As if in slow motion, the ship's distance from the ground decreased more and more and more and even though you know it would crash, the sheer dimensions of it all made the idea impossible to grasp.

Then, the last few feet between ship and ground disappeared in a wild cloud of a whirl dust, a second before the ship crashed – front first – into the unyielding desert-ground.

The noise that followed was ear-shredding.

Explosions erupted all over its surface as the entire enormous complex was crushed by its own mass, huge parts of the ship breaking apart, scattering all over the sand. The infernal screeching of millions of tons of metal bending under unimaginable pressure made all of them shield their ears - even inside the Quinjet, hundreds of feet away.

Still, the ship did not come to an stop, but dug itself deeper into the ground, whirling up tons of sand and dust. It was moving forward slowly, the heap of soil and sand it was throwing up with its front grew larger and larger, mixing with metal parts and small disrooted plants.

The scar it ripped into the landscape had the dimensions of a river-bed, unlikely to disappear for ages.

After what felt like hours, the speed with which it was still moving decreased and, ever so slowly, it came to a halt. When it stopped, it was still burning, even its tremendous forms almost invisible in the dense cloud of dust and smoke.
Steve dared to uncover his ears which were ringing in the sudden silence. Slowly, the others followed his example, all of them in a state of slight shock at what they had just witnessed.

No Chitauri were leaving the ship, but Natasha kept them in the air a while longer, waiting for it. All of them knew, however, that you could not survive a crash like this and if you did, you would be nothing but an unidentifiable mess of crushed bones and flesh.

“Seems to be our lucky day.”, Bruce made a hesitant attempt for cheerfulness, but it somehow went unheard.

“You think it will blow up some more? 'Cause I don't want to be standing next to it when it does.”

“I think there is not much left to blow up. All the engines are already burning, as it looks like.”, Steve answered Clint's question, but he was already losing his state of shock.

The desire to get a closer look became stronger than the huge amount of respect you had to have for something like this.

“Bring us down, Natasha.”

They landed the Quinjet, but remained in a safe radius of about a hundred feet for a while longer, puzzling over what had exactly happened to bring a mothership of this size – it was a mothership, from everything Steve had seen – in a state like this. The smell was sharp – of burnt metal, fuel and smoke - and hurt when you inhaled, even though the wind was carrying the black dust in the other direction. It looked unhealthy.

Thor, usually not short on words, had been unusually silent after the crash. His gaze had been fixated on the burning ship since they had left the Quinjet with his face a stern, unmoving mask – there certainly was something going on in his head.

Steve's thoughts were confirmed when the god suddenly separated from their group, moving closer to the wreck on the ground with a firm determination.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“To see whether I can still rely on my senses.”

His answer was rather enigmatically, but everyone followed him nonetheless. They looked ridiculously small compared to the towering wreck in front of them and it seemed to take ages to get even close.

Thor's cryptic words had made Steve nervous – he did not really like to be left in the dark about something.

“What is it you se-”

Out of nowhere, the middle part of the ship blew up in a blustering explosion of blinding blue, making him flinch and bringing their group to a sudden halt. Pieces of metal penetrated the ground or clashed into other metallic parts of the ship, then, another pillar of smoke emerged in the polluted desert sky. With trained precision, weapons were drawn and fighting stances adopted as all eyes focused on the gaping hole that had opened in the outer wall of the ship.

Involuntarily, Steve held his breath – until he saw it.

A faint blue glow behind all the smoke, impossible to tell apart from the light of the fire at first. He squinted his eyes and tried to look closer.

He knew that kind of blue.
Could it be...?

A quick glance around told him that he was not the only one who had seen it, but a sudden uproar of engines, a noise so distinct he would recognize it in his sleep, made his head whirl towards the ship again.

Drawing a faint tail of blue and white behind, a black figure manifested in the black dust. It moved slowly at first, as if waiting, and the supersoldier felt his heartbeat quicken.

His silhouette outlined by that particular kind of bright blue, the figure hovered over the self-made exit for a few seconds.

On his chest, there was the unmistakable circle of light.

The Iron Man flew a straight line upwards in the sky, and Steve already feared he would leave without a word, but then, the figure made a turn and suddenly gained speed.

Like a comet, it rushed towards them, right towards them, causing Thor to lift Mjölnir in a dark anticipation and Clint utter something like “Shit” between his clenched teeth. The only thing Steve did was pray – pray that Tony would not be so stupid as to attack them now. Pray, that he would stop.

The impact of his landing itself was like the impact of a small bomb, blowing a wall of dust and dirt at the group of Avengers. Only barely, they were able to shield their faces and avoid an unnecessary coughing fit.

Even though his eyes were burning, Steve had to turn towards him again.

It was denotive that nobody even thought about attacking at this point.

Slowly removing his fist from the ground, the metal man rose from his landing position to an upright posture again.

His face-plate gave nothing away of what was going on behind it – although it would have been absurd, the possibility that anybody else than Tony Stark was behind it was at least given. It was mustering them with a cool distanced expression, the whole machine motionless as was the man inside. Inhumanly motionless when you thought about the exertions he had just gone through. The dark plates of his suit were darker at some parts, but the direct sunlight made it hard to tell whether it was blood or oil.

Just when the silence became unbearable, the mask opened with a low buzzing noise.

Dark eyes met his, eyes even darker in the shade of the suit's helmet. A trickle of blood ran down from somewhere invisible above his hairline and mixed with the blood running from his nose, a sensation probably indistinguishable on skin covered in sweat.

His eyes wandered solemnly over the assembled Avengers, like a priest would regard his fellow sheep. If somebody's presence surprised him, he did not let it show. Now, Steve realized that he was still breathing heavily.

Eventually, mercifully releasing them from their anticipation, Tony cracked a sharkish grin.

“Just for the record: Me: 2, Ugly Alienship: 0.”
We think Tony likes playing the badass :D

Comments would be awesome <3
During the first moment, no one uttered a single word, unable to take their eyes of the man in front of them. Tony still grinned at them with a triumphant spark in his eyes.

They all were far from breaking into cries of joy, though: Despite the smiling facade and the inventor's obvious good mood – well, Steve could not resent him for it, he had just brought down an entire Chitauri-mothership all on his own – the atmosphere was taut, the potential for escalation brewing just beneath the surface.

Still, the most dangerous factor had not even arrived on the scene yet. During a brief glimpse to the side, Steve noticed how Clint's gaze roamed over the ship, obviously looking for someone. Thor also didn't have any eyes for Tony, but kept looking at the smoking and burning construct in front of them with this knowing expression.

Just when Steve began to wonder whether Loki had actually still been with Tony when they had entered the ship or if they had separated along the way, there was a second explosion.

This one was not small, like the one that Tony had created to get out of the ship. It was an immense blast of blue energy, right out of the center of the gigantic machine. The bang it caused was loud enough to make it painful to the unshielded ear. Scorched metal parts were hurled high up into the air, thrown into all directions before they rained down onto the desert-sand.

Where had been the inner complex of the ship – connecting the two constructs at each side – there was only a smoldering mass of burnt metal now, glowing red from heat at its edges.

It took a few seconds, then there was a movement. At first, the dark shape was almost invisible in the black smoke that had soared from the explosion, but they all knew who it was. Something scrambled out of the heaps, apparently having been trapped underneath a heavy piece of metal, then climbed out of the wreck completely.

Even from this distance, Steve saw that Loki's condition had deteriorated since their last meeting, but the closer he got the worse it seemed to get.

Loki's clothing were not even worth the name 'rags' anymore: The black hoodie he had worn during their last encounter had been reduced to nothing more than a few shreds of fabric that were somehow holding onto the god's body. The jeans was ripped open on several spots as well and his feet were bare.

Still, even the clothing was nothing compared to Loki's body and his face. His entire form was practically oozing from dark-purplish blood, his hair soaked with it, as well as every part of exposed skin you saw.

What was really frightening though was that haunted, mad look in the god's face, his bright eyes staring from within all that dark blood. When Loki grinned, a shudder ran down Steve's spine as he realized that his teeth were sullied with the same dark substance.

The god halted just at Tony's side and spit something onto the ground that looked an awful lot like a dark piece of flesh, then he chuckled, continuing to stare at them with these insane eyes.

Yet all of sudden, the god's grin vanished as he caught sight of Thor and his face morphed back into a perfect mask of indifference.
They all held their breath for a few seconds. The focus of attention was entirely on the two brothers, their reaction to each other's appearance. Whatever threat Tony might pose – it would always be the gods who would decide how this encounter was going to end.

Still, there was no reaction from either of the Asgardians, they only kept staring at each other, giving away nothing of their intentions.

Then, only hesitantly and almost imperceptible at first, Loki stepped to the side, his movement subdued and slow.

However small the gesture, though, it told enough about the god's intentions for now. With this small maneuver, Loki had position himself slightly behind Tony. The inventor's suit was partly blocking their view of him now and, non-verbally, the god made clear that he was not up for another fight, at least not now.

He would let Tony decide how to proceed.

And with that, the man in his metal suit was back in the center of attention.

Of course, all the time, nobody had really believed that what Tony and Loki were doing was leading to anything worthwhile - not to speak of anything good. Now, only a blind person would still deny their success: Just two man had brought down a Chitauri mothership on their own. Two man (or, technically, one man and a god) had killed over at least a few thousand Chitauri in one go...without any casualties.

Tony seemed to be soaking in the expressions of the others, and did not even turn around to look at his partner in crime, probably not aware about his condition.

"If you're struggling for words, let me aid you with a suggestion: the word you're looking for is 'sorry'."

"You got to be kidding, Tony. We have nothing to apologize for - but I guess we", Steve took a look around, making sure of everybody's approval, "are thankful."

Tony chuckled drily, then slowly shook his head. Of course this was not enough for his broken ego. With this single triumph, Tony had wanted to wipe out every failure from before - and now, he wanted his reward.

"You all have to apologize, just to save your dignity. While we-", to underline his words, Tony reached out with his hand to lay it on Loki's shoulder - and got muddled for a second.

A look to the side had revealed that Loki probably did not look like Tony imagined it. Even to him, it had to look at least like he was lacking that certain righteous confidence Tony was almost bursting with. The look in his eyes was not unlike the one he had seen back in that abandoned city where it would not have taken a lot for the god to just rip the two assassins and Steve himself apart with his bare hands.

Tony had been knocked out of his stride only for a second, then he tore his gaze from Loki to continue.

"We were living like fucking hobos to build something that will, in the end, save your asses as well, you - yes, I'm looking at you two - were trying to hunt us down like escaped animals. You must be really confused about who the bad guys are exactly."

"You gave us enough reason to mistrust you. After all, Loki was an ally of the Chitauri the last time he came to earth, and did not show any will to cooperate later. You left the hospital in the night, you attacked Steve, you shot down a SHIELD helicopter. Not to mention that massacre in
Vegas. Shall I continue?”, Natasha answered with a cold glare, apparently unfazed by Tony's harsh words.

“I don't think that arguing whether who is to blame is really helpful right now.”, Bruce threw in, before Tony even had the chance to reply something to the assassin. Somewhere behind the inventor, Loki had taken on another silent staring match with Thor, who seemed more and more inclined to just storm forward and get to the other Asgardian.

Altogether, one could say that Bruce was right, arguing was not going to help them at all. Still, Tony's demand for an apology – no matter if he had brought down an entire alienship or not – was nothing but ridiculous. Steve decided to ignore it for now.

“And what do you plan to do now? Travel from warzone to warzone, fighting? You won't always be as lucky as you have been today, you know that, Tony.”

Tony squinted his eyes for a second, realizing fully well that he was still not taken seriously. Yet, it did not stop him from answering, since Loki seemed not inclined to undertake the talking part right now.

"Nah, we have seen how well that works. You have to destroy the source of their power instead of taking on each and everyone of them on their own. We will do the dirty work, again."

“Speaking of dirt: Maybe you should take a shower first.”, commented Steve, taking in Tony's and Loki's messed up appearance.

He had the strong feeling that he would not get through to the billionaire now. Out here on the battlefield, where he was still in his armor, soaked in his enemies blood and with the burning proof of his success right behind him, Tony was too out of touch with reality.

So he chose another path instead - an offering for peace. An offering the engineer was more likely to accept now, because no matter what he had just accomplished, he looked as if he could use a break. Loki, on the other end, looked like he needed at least a year of treatment.

Tony, already eager to talk back, just for the sake of talking back, stopped with his mouth opened. You could see in his eyes that the word 'shower' seemed to ring a bell, but as he (not to speak of Loki) looked like, they had not seen an awful lot of those recently.

Even from the distance of ten feet, there was a certain smell emanating from them, an unpleasant mixture of blood, dirt, sweat and smoke. Yes, definitely in need of a shower.

The ex-billionaire closed his mouth again, then looked over to the god with a questioning look. For a moment, Loki regarded him with his attention which had formerly been completely occupied by his brother, then he gave a subtle nod.

Tony turned around to Steve again, a insufferable smirk playing in the corners of his mouth.

"Sounds almost like an apology to me."

The Captain rolled his eyes, only to see the other man's grin grow even bigger. Annoying him seemed to fill him with some strange kind of pride.

When Steve turned around to the rest of the group, the others still looked a little bit confused, apparently not having expected this sudden change of events. Clint looked as if he was about to throw a tantrum (although he still managed to keep himself in check skillfully) and well, he could only try to fathom how much it had to adverse Clint to walk
that close to Loki without being allowed to attack him. The archer held his eyes on the god the entire time, who followed as the last one of their strange little group back to the Quinjet. Even Thor seemed to have let off his urgent desire to get to Loki.

They eventually reached the Quinjet and went back into the machine, Clint and Natasha first, Bruce and Thor following close behind. Steve turned around to take a look at their newly invited guests, who were still standing outside, regarding their vehicle.

The Captain could already read in Tony's eyes that he would not enter the jet without another comment.

"This is the best you got?", he asked with this annoying grin in his face, but then went on to join them. Loki was the last one to enter, oddly reserved and always keeping his distance, standing almost awkwardly behind Tony. If Steve did not know it better, he would say that Loki looked as if he was expecting an assault within the next five seconds. At least he was not running amok, as he had been during their last meeting.

Tony sat down on the end of the metallic bench, but Loki somehow managed to squeeze himself beside him - he seemed determined to use him as a barrier between him and the others. Yet, nobody commented on it. When Clint silently refused to return to his seat in the cockpit and remained standing, watching Loki with all the cold distaste a single person could muster, Steve had to take his upper arm and gently push him to his place.

Natasha was already sitting in her seat - what they were doing was unorthodox and probably not as they had planned, but she seemed to be satisfied with the outcome nonetheless.

When the Quinjet started its engines again, it was silent between the passengers inside.

Bruce sat calmly on the other end of the room. Although he hid it well, the little glances he threw at the two newly boarded passengers were obvious. The staring battle between the god and his once-brother had stopped while entering the machine and had not been resumed since - which was not because of Thor, but clearly of Loki's unwillingness to do so. The Thundergod still looked like he was almost bursting from the things he wanted to say to Loki, but could not, because they were not alone. Or, because Loki would not listen.

In silence, they first left the still smoking Chitauri wreck and then the desert behind them and slowly, silence changed into awkwardness. For Steve, at least, because when he looked over to Tony, he saw that he had allowed himself to close his eyes for a few seconds, probably thinking that no one noticed. The exertions seemed to take their toll, no matter what he pretended.

It was hard to believe, but the worst really seemed to be over. Tony and Loki were both quiet, maybe even unusually quiet, but for now, Steve would not complain. He felt how the tension of the anticipated battle slowly faded from his body, and only now he noticed how relieved he was. Everything had went far better than expected: The Chitauri ship had been struck down without a single causality, no one of them was injured, and they had found Tony, even without having been forced to retrieve him from the East Coast.

Yes, things were looking up now. Steve could work with that.

Of course, there was Loki, and neither of them knew how to proceed with the hostile god in their midst when no one knew for sure how much of a threat he was. But somehow, Steve trusted Tony to ensure that the god would do nothing to endanger any of them.
There was a loud noise from outside when helicopters passed the Quinjet – huge military vehicles – obviously on their way to the burning wreck. As they passed by, you could hear their commands and conversations in the right radio channel, but no one made an attempt to stop them on their way. They kept flying without being addressed at all.

Eventually, after a very quiet and uneventful ride, the Quinjet was back in the garden, landing just at the right spot to dig another rupture into the already harassed ground.

Tony raised his eyebrows the moment he caught sight of the house and made a whistling sound.

“Getting into it, I see? A little bit frumpy for my taste, but I know that's just your thing. But, what must my unbelieving eyes see - no flag?”

The ex-billionaire prattled on and on like that – the amused grin never leaving his face, as if nothing had ever changed - striding on out into the garden as if he owned the place.

It was bizarre, to see Tony like he had been before, witty and always open for a joke on Steve's expense, yet he knew better than to take it for real. Nothing else than a facade, only held up by the last remains of adrenaline surging through his body. Steve wondered what he would be like once he had calmed down, if he would return to his previous state of disdain and skepticism.

“I'm sure you want to rest and shower... there is a guest-room upstairs on the left. I think there is a lot of space on the attic as well.”

Steve did not need to say for whom the actual room and for whom the place in the attic was meant. It seemed to be a common agreement to keep Loki as far away as possible, and fortunately, the god did not comment on it. He probably had not expected anything else.

Steve led the two new arrivals through the huge glass door that opened to the backyard, along the hallway and then upstairs, where he showed Tony the door to his room and Loki the stairs that would lead up onto the attic.

“We will cook dinner, you can come down later, if you like to.”, he eventually added and it felt more than odd to actually include Loki to an invitation for dinner. Without another word, Steve left the two men and returned downstairs, only to run into Clint, who apparently had been waiting for him.

“He's not as invincible as he pretends to be.”, the archer said.

“Who, Tony? I don't know-”

“I mean Loki. Haven't you noticed it? He was trembling, the entire time. If we want to take him down, now might be our only chance.”

In another situation, Steve might have been inclined to take on this opportunity, but he knew that right now, there was nothing more harmful to the newly established truce than an attempt to kill Loki. He did not even need to think about it, it was clear from the beginning what he had to say.

“No. We can't afford to loose Tony's support now, neither Thor's. As long as Loki is no danger to us, you or anyone else in this house will not attack him. I know you hate him, Clint, and you know that I'm not very fond of him either, but for now, we have to tolerate his presence.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, but eventually, Clint nodded and turned to leave.

Steve already knew that the following days would be anything but easy.
Neither of them even considered that Loki would sleep on the attic. For months, they had slept close together and new surroundings, however secluded and warm, would change nothing about that – on the contrary.

If they had been surrounded by enemies before, it was now, with the constant subtle demand to justify their partnership, that he wanted to be close to the god.

He was the first to enter the room, Loki following close behind. The room was nice, there was no other word to describe it. Dark wood furnishing, big bright windows – although at the moment covered by shutters, allowing only thin rays of light into the room – and with a huge bed. It looked like freshly cut out of one of those random magazines you found in the lobby of five-star hotels.

Yet for now, he could not muster much interest. His bones and muscles hurt from the exertion, a full-body burning that was at once causing a unpleasant tension and a deep, overwhelming fatigue. Beneath the armor, he felt every blow he had suffered during the day, felt the stickiness of his sweat-soaked shirt and how heavy the metal weighed on his shoulders.

“I'm going to clean myself up a bit.”

The suit dismantled around Tony, falling to the ground with soft clanking noises. Now, he not only felt, but saw the mess he was beneath the metallic plates and the urge to scrub entire layers of dirty skin from his body became almost unbearable. His eyes started to scan the room for the door to the promised bathroom and yes, indeed, there it was, and Tony was there in a matter of seconds. Mentally, he made a note that he should ask Loki for his odd behavior from before or the fact that he seemed not even remotely as eager to clean the already drying blood from his body as Tony was. Yet, the entire situation was so strange and unreal that his mind just switched to autopilot.

Mechanically, as if his body moved on its own accord, he closed the bathroom door behind him, then started to peal off his pullover, followed by his sticky t-shirt, then jeans and boxers. After he had shoved the heap of clothes in a corner with his foot (he should burn it immediately, not even a homeless person would be willing to wear that), he walked towards the shower.

It came to his mind that, given the fact that he looked like he had been dipped in a tub of blood, Loki had more of a right to shower first than he had, but then he thought that he could equally well just join him in the bathroom.

He was not going to wait now.

The sensation of the cold, but smooth and clean tiles under his feet was almost odd after months, but it was nothing compared to the goose-bumps caused from the water from out of the shower head running over his hand when he felt its temperature. It was hardly believable: water, hot water which was not even contaminated, just for the sake of cleaning himself. The few seconds of running water on his hand was more than he had been able to drink within the last week. When he stepped under the spurt, felt the sparkling sensation on his back and the hot liquid rinse off the sweat and dirt along his shoulders and spine, he closed his eyes and let out a small groan. This was not unlike the first shower after Afghanistan - only that now, he was not in some random military base in the desert. A faint glimpse of Rhodey's face appeared behind his closed eyes and he wondered how he had been able to forget a person once so close so quickly.
He took his time under the shower and did not even take offense at the cheap smelling shower gel
to his usage. Everything which did not reek of dust and dirt and metal or the scorched flesh of alien
beasts was fine with him.
Turning the water off, he had to force himself to open his eyes again. Warmth and this faintest of
suggestions of safety was enough to make his body report that he was over-strained and stressed
and that running on your emergency reserves for weeks was not a wise thing to do.

In a leisurely way, he left the shower and started toweling himself, experiencing an almost perverse
pleasure from the softness of the towel. The shower had succeeded in clearing his mind a bit,
switching to manual again. His pulse had normalized and his body was adjusting to the new
surroundings - he was starting to show something like interest again. Now, he wanted to take a
look in the mirror, whatever he was about to see in there.
Wiping away the condensation with his hand, the face of a stranger emerged beneath.

Boy, he had lost weight. The hair and beard was something he had grown used to, of necessity, but
he was looking malnourished. In the same second, a low gurgle from his stomach underlined the
impression and he remembered Steve saying something about cooking.
No, not now.
With an almost painful intensity, he remembered something which was of absolute priority, even
concerning food. Whatever he wanted to do after - first, he had to look after Loki.

Suddenly not interested in his appearance any more, he tugged the towel around his hips and
opened the bathroom door again. He had problems to even find the god at first and for a second, he
thought that he might have gone downstairs for food or to the attic to shower.
Then, he finally saw him, a smallish figure sunken down on the wall, right beside the door.

"Ah, shit, Loki.", he muttered and hurried over to him in the next second. He was unconscious,
obviously, body leaning to the side in an unnatural way. Tony knelt down in front of him and
grabbed his upper arms, heaving him in an upright position again.
The strong grab on his upper arms and Tony's voice eventually managed to tear Loki back out of
his sleep and he blinked his eyes open. He looked worse than before, not tired or exhausted, but as
if even the simple act of opening his eyes demanded more energy than his body could provide.
Tony swallowed down his concern, then he let his hand travel from Loki's shoulder to the side of
his face to hold his head up.

“What's wrong, Loki? Are you injured?”
Loki slowly shook his head, eyes already closing again.

“No, just... exhausted.”
His murmur was trailing off into a whisper at the end of his sentence, barely understandable. There
was just one thing of help now and even though it would certainly involve ruining the white
bedsheets, he would do it.

“Exhausted, huh? Why don't you go into the bed then? Wait, let me help you-”
Tony started tugging at Loki in an attempt to get him back onto his feed, but the god did not even
make an effort to comply. He was heavy, way too heavy for him to get him of the floor and it was
worse with basically zero body tension.
Eventually, when Tony's attempts started to get a frustrated edge, Loki mumbled something again.
It did not really help easing the frustration.

“I can't go into the bed, I have to shower first.”

“You kidding? You're too tired to stand on your legs, but you don't want to use the bed because you're not clean? That's some royal bullshit you got there. I'm sure Steve has enough bedding for a change around here, come on, you can't stay on the floor like that.”

Anew, Tony started tugging at his shoulders, but Loki did not even have to put any effort into staying on the ground. The inventor was exhausted, as well, his muscles ached and his arms felt like made of concrete. He simply lacked the strength.

“I said no, just let me be.”

There was a hint of annoyance in Loki's voice now and, with all of his remaining strength, he slapped away Tony's hands. That was enough.

“Fine.”

Tony sat back on his heels, thinking. Then, he went for the second best idea and grabbed from Loki's hoodie what would not fall apart upon his touch to pull the sad remains of what had once been a piece of clothing over his head. The jeans turned out to be slightly more critical, and he felt more like he was just tearing parts of it off than actually undressing somebody. What was beneath the clothing was pretty disturbing, but he was hardened by now. Smeared blood all over white, sweaty skin – nothing new. Tony grabbed the bundle of clothes and left for the bath. Just when he threw them onto the others, a faint reddish hue on Loki's hoodie caught his attention and he halted. This did not look like Chitauri blood.

However, he could not concentrate on it. Not now, anyway. Quickly, he grabbed a towel and soaked it with warm water and shower gel, then he returned to the defeated trickster. With more or less gentle movements, he started to scrub off the dried blood, starting with his face and hair. If the majesty was too noble to sully the bed, he had to endure this humiliating procedure instead – what else was there to expect? Of course, preventing him from sullying the bed had to the last thing Loki was able to do on the verge of fainting.

The god made an angry growl and then plucked the wet cloth out of Tony's grasp. Obviously, the cold water on his skin had reawakened his spirit somewhat, and with growing enthusiasm, Loki cleaned the reeking dark blood off his skin, eventually tossing the ruined towel away when he was done.

“Better now?”, Tony asked, offering his hand to the god to help him up.

“Yes, but there is still room for improvement.”, Loki responded, this time accepting Tony's hand and letting himself be pulled into a standing position, only to drop a moment later once he had reached the bed.

It took Loki not even 5 seconds to fall asleep. As soon as his breath became slow and regular again, Tony removed himself from the bed and walked back towards the bathroom. He had to check something, just to make sure that his eyes were lying to him.

Oh, he wished his eyes were lying to him.

From the heap of sullied clothes, he picked up Loki's hoodie again and walked closer to the light for another observation. While disposing of it a few minutes before, he had noticed the odd color:
Bronze, not black, like the Chitauri's blood. A reddish bronze, the color human blood turned into during oxidation - or Aesir blood. It had just been a glimpse before, but now, it was not undeniable.

There was Loki's blood on the hoodie, it was practically soaked with it.

Tony pressed his lips together, then looked up and over to the sleeping god again. There were no wounds on his body, of course not. Yet, he had been wounded, severely as it looked like, severe enough to drain his reserves. With an angry movement, he threw the ragged hoodie in the corner again and returned to sit down on Loki's side.

He did not move for some time. Lost in thoughts, he let his fingers trail over the line of the other's jaw and down his neck and shoulders. The wet towel had only removed the grossest parts of dirt and blood and there were still dark particles of dried liquid and smears on his body, but Tony did not mind.

It was Loki's condition that bothered him and successfully darkened his mood. The level of exhaustion Loki showed was not normal and confirmed his worries. The inventor had seen him fight before, even without the additional strength which was now running through his veins and never in his entire time with him Loki had just fainted. Only once, when he had been sick from the alien infection and had clung to his life in this shabby motel room.

This was no motel, this was the house of a person who still called himself Tony's friend, but curiously enough, he did not feel the pleasant knowledge of safety not the joy of triumph any longer. To know that Loki had probably come within a whisker of death and not to know why he had been so unusually careless devalued all of it.

It was stupid to think of it now, here, but even the pure idea of losing Loki after all of what they had gone through made him feel nauseous.

With a sigh, he eventually decided to leave the room. There was nothing he could do but wait for the other to wake up and he had the feeling that this would take some time. Before he rose to his feet, the genius placed a small kiss right at the sleeping god's cheek bone. For a moment, he halted to hover over his ear in the intention to say something, but then decided against it. He should go down and eat something.

A look in all the closets quickly revealed that this room had apparently never been used, or meant to be used - they were completely empty. It would not have been that much of a problem for him to just go down wearing nothing but the towel, but upon opening the door of their room, he found a set of neatly folded clothes on the floor in front of it.

They did not fit him and they smelled suspiciously of Clint's aftershave, but they would do. Silent like a ghost, he quickly hurried up to the attic to find the second set of clothing (Steve's maybe?) and bring it down into their room for Loki who was still soundly sleeping.

The suit was secured and extemporary hidden under the bed - with Jarvis instructed to electroshock anybody who dared touching it except him or Loki - and some order was brought into his still slightly wet hair somehow, then, Tony walked downstairs.

Even halfway down the stairs, he could smell it.

The kitchen was filled with the smell of fresh tomatoes and herbs, the air damp with the evaporation of a huge pot of noodles.

Right now, only Steve and Bruce were in the kitchen, the former running from shelf to shelf, collecting the lat ingredients for his selfmade tomato-sauce, while the doctor was sitting at the desk, nose-deep in a book.

Natasha and Clint were not present, as was Thor.

The inventor did not even regard one of them with much more than a glance, though - his attention...
was on the cooking food alone. He stepped closer to take a look at the contents of the two pots, satisfied with what he found.

“I hope this is alright.”, Steve asked when Tony did not make a comment on the food.

The idea that there was anything he would not like to eat now was so ridiculous that Tony had almost laughed out loud. He grinned patronizingly at Steve instead.

“Can't say I had anything better during the last months.”

However, he was not here for chit-chat, there were far more urgent needs he had to satisfy. A quick look around the kitchen, then his eyes found the fridge. With quite steps – the noise was subdued by the thick white socks he was wearing – the inventor made his ways over to the device and opened it.

It was not that he was aiming to be impolite or greedy, but the luxury of a bottle of fresh cold water to his avail right now was more than he could handle. He ignored the looks he earned himself when he fiddled with a bottle of water, although he noticed them quite well. The stupid thing was slippery from condensation and unscrewing it a real challenge, but when it was open, he started drinking straight from the bottle.

Fucking hell, this was so good. What did he care for the droplets of water running down at the sides of his chin? What did he care for their looks? This was simply amazing – but, not as amazing as the orange juice his attention fell on a second later. Without hesitation, he lowered the bottle and put it back, taking the juice instead.

“We have other things, if you like. Apple juice and-”

Steve's voice trailed off again when he realized that he was no competition for a bottle of orange juice.

It needed half a bottle to satisfy the first thirst and when he put it away again, there was still a whole pot of noodles waiting for him.

Tony felt like he was on holiday – and really, that was what he was doing here, that was, why he had accepted the offer: he needed a holiday. They both needed to recharge before they could even think of taking on anybody and rumor had it that Steve Rogers was a quite acceptable chef.

Tony sat down on the table, giving the book Bruce was still holding only a brief, mildly interested glance, then his attention was back on the food in front of him.

“Is Loki not coming?”, the doctor asked, putting the book aside, looking at Tony and interrupting him before he could push his fork into the steaming dish.

“No, I think he needs a little bit of time for himself.”

His stomach was grumbling again and Tony decided that his answer did not need to be any more precise. He did not even look at Bruce, his eyes stayed on the food - noodles with a bright red tomato sauce on them, no meat because of Bruce, evidently - and before Steve had the chance to join them on the table, it was as if a switch had been turned within him.

The moment the first full fork entered his mouth, he started ravening the food like a starving man – which he was – gulping down everything without even bothering to chew.

Usually, Tony had excellent table-manners, if he wanted to, but holy macaroni, this tasted illegally good. A few months on the run and out in the wasteland with nothing to eat than canned leftovers, a lifetime of expensive banquets and business-dinners was easily forgotten.
“Slow down, Tony, you're not doing yourself a favor.”, Bruce eventually said with a concerned look on his face.

"Can't talk, I'm eating.", Tony muttered with his mouth full of noodles, not even bothering to sound articulate or be understood at all.

Even if this would end with his head in the toilet bowl, he would not deny himself a home-cooked meal after months of canned beans. He would never eat canned beans again, ever. Also, he had to admit that Steve was indeed quite a good cook - well, perhaps it was not so much the blonde's inherent ability to make a decent Pasta al pomodoro, but the fact that he was practically dying from hunger.

He ate two piled plates before his stomach started to hurt, but then he ate half of a third one regardless.

Only then, he leaned back in his chair with a satisfied, yet slightly pained expression and, for the first time since they had been captured by Adams, felt not hungry.

He had not realized that Steve had sat down as well and that both of them had been staring at him for a few minutes now, obviously either mesmerized or disgusted. Not that Tony had ever felt uncomfortable in the role of a badly mannered child, but this time, he had been actually hungry. When nobody said a word, he cocked an eyebrow, patiently waiting for any comment which had to be on the tip of their tongues. Again, it struck him how odd it was to be here, in a room with them, calmly eating pasta.

Three very unlike men, two of them collected from the end of the world - one literally, the other only figuratively.

"Where's the other half of the gang?", Tony eventually asked, already imagining Clint planning an ambush on the sleeping, vulnerable Loki in the back of his head. Not the thoughts he needed right now.

"They left to avoid unnecessary... friction. There's a lot remaining unclear between you and all of us."

"Oh, yeah. For a start, I wondered why you are not wearing one of those Captain America aprons I've seen in the commercials."

Steve answered his grin only half-heartedly. He would notice soon enough that today was not the day for great discussions. He would not be able to drag any single useless answer from him today, because today, the inventor had prescribed himself (including Loki) a day off. Well, make that at least two days.

Yet, come to think about it, there was one thing which actually interested him. He leaned forward again, not sure on who to address the question exactly, because he was not sure what answer he had to expect.

"Sorry if this is too blunt, but I must ask: Is this the new SHIELD headquarter? I knew there were budget cuts and these are hard times, but exhuming the Q6 model jet from four years ago and now residing in a house in the suburbs?"

There was a hint of an amused smile on Bruce's face and for a second, a reminiscence of their old connection showed through, but it was Steve who answered. He sounded not as casual as Tony had meant his question to be, but in fact a little irritated.

"Look, things happen at home, too. Just because you have been not here does not mean things here
don't change. We're not working for SHIELD anymore."

The engineer's face had hardened at Steve's tone and his dark eyes fixated on the blue one's of the other, every former hint of joke in them now vanished. He might be making cheap jokes with them again, but this did not mean that he wanted to rejoin their team again.

"L.A. is not my home anymore."

"I was not speaking of L.A."

"Look who cares to join us.", Bruce released the building tension in their conversation, causing their two heads to turn towards the kitchen door.

As silent as a shadow, Loki had come down the stairs and slipped inside the kitchen, now crossing the few feet between the door and the table to stand behind Tony's chair. He had showered, obviously, and he was wearing the new clothes as well (definitely Steve's).

Although sleep had done him good, it had apparently not been enough. His eyes had dark circles under them and he looked taut. Still, he kept his thin lips closed, eying the food on the table with a mixture of suspicion and greed.

Tony resisted the urge to touch him.

"I will get you a plate, if you want.", Steve offered and you could hear that he was still irresolute on how to treat the god.

Loki regarded the supersoldier with a brief look and then answered:

“I would like that very much.”

It was interesting to see how both Bruce's and Steve's expressions changed in Loki's presence – as if he was some kind of dirty animal that had sneaked into their house, incapable of normal, human interaction and ready to snap at any given moment.

Of course, he had done some damage during their last meeting, had even attempted to kill them, but anybody who did not saw that the person standing here in the kitchen was a different one was blind.

Tony watched as Loki sat down onto the chair right next to him, accepting the dish out of the Captain's hand. However, whatever hunger he might feel, his eyes spoke of confusion. The genius was always glad to help.

“Noodles, Loki. What I ate once from the can, just that those are actually freshly made.”

The god threw a glance at Tony, then followed his reassurance and started eating, yet only slowly. Evidently, it took him some time to find out how to swirl the nasty little things around his fork properly, but once he had learned it, he ate with growing enthusiasm.

Tony decided that he could allow himself some relaxation. He felt so full anyway that anything regarding more effort than lying on his chair with his head thrown back and his eyes closed was too much for him.

Still, the atmosphere was not a comfortable one.

He knew from the silence that both Bruce and Steve were either watching Loki or pretending they were not, what would most likely drive the god up the walls.

Yet thankfully, Tony was also becoming awfully tired and could escape in a state of blissful semi-
consciousness, listening to all those words nobody said to each other. Only now, when he had nothing to think about for the time being, it came to his mind that he and Loki shared more than one secret the others would be surprised to hear.

He could imagine well enough that all of the Avengers were, despite their newly found independence from SHIELD, had an incredible desire to know what had happened to the Tesseract - but he was 100% sure that they would go completely through the roof if anybody would find out that he and Loki were not only partners in crime.

Not just the sex, though - although Thor would love this - but the fact that in those months out in the wasteland, there had grown more between them than a bond of friendship. Never had anybody lost a word about the nature of their relationship, but it was clear that they would stick together. Whatever would come, whatever the events would lead them to - if his loyalties would be tested, it would be Loki he would choose. It caused a disquieting feeling in his chest when he realized that nobody of the others would understand this decision.

The strange atmosphere of their meal became a different touch when you knew that there was nothing here that mattered to him as much as Loki did. Tony knew that this made him weak and a target for not only criticism but a death penalty, probably.

Suddenly, he felt the urge to leave.

Opening his eyes, he blinked a few times, then turned to look at Loki who was done eating his noodles. He did not look at ease as well and the angry glistening in his eyes indicated that he would probably promote the idea of leaving the kitchen.

"I bought some chocolate bars as well, if anybody wants a piece."

Steve was faster than Tony again, successfully directing his attention away from the god and to today's head chef. A special treat before he would get away from here and try out the super comfy looking bed in their room sounded too good to be ignored.

"What do you got?"

"Uhh...", the supersoldier got up and started rummaging through a box on the counter, "I've got Mars and.. Twix and... Bounty.."

"Twix."

The plastic cover rustled in his fingers when he opened it and he remembered the time in the beginning of their journey when they had eaten all this sweet stuff from the gas station. He took one bar and handed the other to Loki, who was already eying the candy with curiosity again.

It was only a second later, when his mouth was already full of this delicious sugary sweetness, that he noticed the stares. Sharing their food felt so natural by now, but when he looked at the eyes of the two others, he suddenly knew that they had probably given away too much.

Yeah, leaving was a good idea. Right, now.

There was a rushing noise from outside, then one could hear the sound of something hitting the stones of the terrace.
Four glances simultaneously turned towards the origin of the sound.

“It seems Thor is back.”, Steve stated, looking out of the window into the dusky garden.

The reaction this announcement triggered in Loki was predictable, yet still surprisingly impolite.
Without even the decency to give his thanks for the food, he stood up, removed the chair and left the kitchen without another word.

Tony's gaze followed him until he had left the room, nervously anticipating the Thundergod's arrival himself. It was not that he had any unresolved issues with him, but on the other side, he knew that Thor's questions would not be as easily dismissed as Steve's. Thor did not answer well to his cagey joking.

Leaving was the best option, still.

"Gonna see after our diva.", Tony quickly said while gulping down his last bite of chocolate, then he hurriedly pushed back his chair to follow Loki.

Just at the doorframe he basically ran into the broad richly ornamented chest-plate which was Thor. A glance upwards and a brief, apologizing smile, then he squeezed himself through the small pathway between god and doorframe. He could hear him inquire about his sudden exit, but he was already too far away to hear what the others answered. Hopefully, the food would occupy the God of Thunder for some time - he did not want to know what would happen if he decided to visit his brother in his room in the attic.

After he had entered their shared room again, he locked the door - just in case.

Loki was standing in front of the window, looking outside. Since they had arrived here, he seemed somehow distant and reserved, but Tony could not hold it against him. Whereas his own presence in this house was in the worst case the cause of a lot of upheaval, Loki was considered nothing but a threat to the others.

Slowly, Tony let himself sink down on his side of the bed, only marginally noticing that it looked like freshly laundered again. His gaze lingered on the lean, but thin frame of Loki's body which still radiated exhaustion and tiresome wariness.

"Couldn't sleep without me by your side, huh?"

The god did not answer first, but turned around instead to look at Tony. Then, he sighed and shook his head, sitting down on the other end of the bed.

"This place is.. crowded with people. It's hostile."

Tony reached out his hand, then waved the other to come closer.

"Come here. C'mon. You need sleep and I suggest you to be asleep in the next three seconds because otherwise my snoring will be your lullaby."

He did not say anything about the blood he had seen and nothing about the worrisome appearance of the god - this was not the moment. They would talk about it, but right now, he wanted nothing more than sleep with Loki close to him, being sure that even though they were not on their own any longer, it was still the two of them.

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Again, Loki woke in the middle of the night, the pain in his body keeping him from getting the sleep he so desperately needed. It was only one night of many, and slowly, the lack of rest was taking its toll on him.

Like when he had entered the house, his head was still swimming and he felt nauseous. His muscles were deprived of strength, his legs barely enough to keep him standing if he tried to. Even
though lying in a soft bed did him good, he felt restless at the same time, like he was having a fever.

With a small sigh, Loki opened his eyes, only to be met with an almost total blackness of the room they were in. The only light to illuminate the room came from the slight atmospheric glow from outside – probably too faint to be seen by a mortal's eyes. Moving carefully, he unwound himself from Tony's arms who had been holding him the entire night, softly breathing into Loki's nape. A few silent steps later, Loki found himself in the bathroom, his pale skin bathed into the warm glow of an electric light.

The pounding inside his head had not subdued after the fight in the ship, it almost felt as if it had even increased. A constant throbbing at the base of his skull, a scorching heat inside of his body, a heat that did not belong there. He felt the strong urge to rip himself open, to rip out his spine and those damn pieces of metal imbedded in it. And there was this constant, high pitched noise in his ears, making the silence unbearable.

Knowing that he would see nothing, he raised his hands to look at them. They felt awful too, moving them hurt, but even if there was no touch at all there was a stinging pain, as if they were covered by open wounds.

No, he had to look beneath the magical facade. Only a brief look, though, he could not allow himself more... Tony would probably notice his absence and come looking for him.

The illusion cast over his arms faded away, yet nothing could have prepared Loki for what he was about to see. Since he had noticed it first, he had not taken a single look at the strange wound at his arm and the change it had taken was frightening.

His entire lower arms were covered in strangely glowing cuts - some only superficial, others deep enough to show bone. Right through the palm of his right hand was a deep slice, oozing a glowing thick bluish liquid and emitting a strong heat. It actually was a miracle that Tony had not noticed the unnatural temperature his body was producing.

And still, despite this worrying development, Loki did not feel any panic.

He knew that he only had to endure this a while longer, until he had fulfilled his mission of killing Thanos. After that, he could still tell Tony about the effect the Tesseract's energy had on him, and Tony would help him to get rid of it. Just as he had put them in, he would pluck the little implants out of his bones and fix him up. He trusted Tony. There would be a way, for sure.

Loki heard the approaching footsteps only in the last moment before the handle of the bathroom door was moved. The illusion flickered back into existence, covering up any trace of glowing wounds successfully, yet it was already to late to hide that something was amiss.

The door opened, and Tony entered the bath, looking slightly disheveled and blinking sleepily into the light.

"Thought you were not just taking a piss."

Tony, although obviously drowsy and a little confused, managed to sound adequately skeptical and squint his eyes at the god, but then a hearty yawn alleviated his tone.

"I could not sleep. Your concern is appreciated, but futile."

"You're hiding something from me."
With a low clicking noise, the mortal closed the bathroom door behind him, although the possibility that they were being intercepted was small. For a moment, the god felt a bit like a trapped animal, but it took him no time to conceal this emotion.

"Everything is fine, Tony. You of all people should know those sleepless nights."

The other nodded with a reminiscent expression and ran his hands through his messy hair, but then he focused his eyes back on Loki's.

"Yeah, but that's not it. I saw your blood on your hoodie, y'know."

For a short moment, Loki felt relieved. If Tony thought the blood-loss from the night before was the reason for his odd behavior, it meant that the actual truth was still hidden from him.

"Yes, there was a wound, yet nothing but the result of a slight miscalculation. You know that things like this won't kill me."

As if to reassure himself that everything was alright, Loki walked towards the sink and opened the faucet to clean his hands, like he often tended to do when he had fresh water at his avail. Yet, he knew that Tony was far from being convinced.

Loki only saw his reflection in the mirror, how he crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned his back against the closed door, watching with that determined look.

"You don't miscalculate, usually. And when you do, you are sneaky enough to evade the consequences."

Loki only had a dry chuckle for that, then he started toweling his hands, careful and slow. He focused on his hands, yet he felt the intense glare of the other through the mirror, until he had enough. Abruptly, he looked up and their eyes met.

"You're exhausted, your reserves are drained. You 'miscalculate'. For somebody at the peak of his power you look a lot more like roadkill to me."

"A lot of things happened today. I think we should return to sleep. Don't worry Tony, everything will be fine."

Of course, Loki knew that the matter was not off the table, but it did not need to be. He only needed to hang on a while longer, and then Tony could know everything.

With a soft but determined grasp, Loki took Tony's upper arm and guided him back towards the dark room, the human only following hesitantly. He was very well aware that he would not get more out of Loki, if the god did not want to give away more information. If he liked it or not, he would have to wait.

Once this was settled, it was no difficulty to shove Tony back onto the bed. The light in the bathroom flickered out, and they were once again left in the dark.

Tony's reactor was the only source of light and Loki felt himself drawn towards it like a moth to the moon. His hands did not leave Tony, not even as they were both comfortably lying beneath their blanket
again. Again, he wondered how Tony did not feel the ominous heat radiating from his palm, but that thought was shoved into the back of his mind.

Because he knew one thing was sure: He would not let himself be separated from Tony.

Chapter End Notes

Avengers-sleepover! Yay! (And Loki is send to the attic D:) I hope you liked having a longer chapter again, despite all the drama, it was quite relaxing to write, after all the fighting scenes ^o^
The light of the midday sun woke him in the next morning.

In his sleepiness, it took him some time to figure out what exactly was wrong with this fact, until he realized that the last time that sunlight had woken him was .. hell, he had no idea. Now, however, the room was lit up by sunlight, since nobody of them had thought about closing the curtains when they had fallen asleep. Outside, the sky was blue, that sort of blinding blue you only got on a clear Californian morning. It was beautiful, but strangely unreal, as was the feeling of the soft white bedclothes under his hands when he let them wander.

Those dark thoughts of the night seemed to have vanished with the fading darkness, unable to unfold their power in broad daylight. They were still there, in is head like a steady white noise of worry that soured every feeling of being at ease with the world. Yet, there were impressions more prominent than his concern.

His body, running on pilot flame the entire last weeks, had brought down everything not essentially necessary for survival. Now, that he had slept in, had eaten and was comparably safe, his numbed senses started to come back to life again.

On his side, he felt the presence of another being in his bed, heard the god's breathing on his side and let his hand wander a bit further until he met resistance in form of his body, where he let it rest on his abdomen, covered with the same white blanket he himself had been sleeping under.

When he turned his head to the side, he met the look of Loki's bright green eyes. One corner of Tony's mouth curled into a smile.

"You remember what I said about white sheets and fluffy pillows?"

The god returned his smile with a slight grin and nodded. He looked pale, still, but the circles under his eyes had receded to a faint purplish shade. Tony found that he now looked more like he was having a cold coming on than like a floater.

"I can't really remember what it felt like, to be at a place like this, safe and warm and without the likelihood of an attack.", the god chuckled softly, "‘Safe – well, mostly at least.'"

Loki's eyes moved to the door at the other end of the room for a split second, as if expecting his words to trigger an immediate ambush, but Tony refused to play his game of paranoia. Looking at Loki at his side, clean and uninjured, his hair all over the cushion from sleep, he felt the strong desire to roll over and kiss him. The soft skin on his temples, his lips, partly opened, his moving adam's apple.

Without thought, his hand was roaming over the body on his side, first above the blanket, but then he sneaked beneath it. He knew that Loki noticed it, one could feel it in the way his breathing changed only the slightest bit, stopping for a second when he eventually crept under the white shirt the god was wearing.

Loki closed his eyes for another moment, enjoying Tony's caresses and letting himself go limp in the soft blankets. The sight was drawing him closer, the rustling of the bed-sheets from his movements barely audible. His hand was still moving over the god's side and abdomen, then upwards over his rips, this touch featherlight.
When Loki opened his eyes again, he looked directly into Tony's eyes and the inventor could not
do other than close what little distance had still remained between them. His other hand moved
upwards as well, cupping the side of Loki's face to bring their mouths together in a slow and lazy
kiss.

It felt differently now, here, without the desperate edge, the clinging together for dear life, but not
any less good. The god's lips felt natural against his, warm and soft like they had not felt before,
and Tony could not keep his hands off him, his fingers drawing small, comforting circles.

Loki purred into the kiss, then suddenly moved forward, on top of Tony.

His lips escaped a startled gasp at first as he found himself suddenly being trapped under the heavy
body of a god, but surprise soon turned into amusement.

“I'm not a professional, but I think you're feeling better.”

“Oh, yes.”

Loki's lips parted in a sly grin and he shifted slightly in Tony's lap, subtly making sure that he
know that he was there.

The resolute movement had stripped them from any remaining blankets and their bodies were both
exposed to the air.

Loki's t-shirt was slightly twisted from sleep, exposing half of his stomach for Tony's sight and
even though white was definitely not Loki's color, he looked absolutely gorgeous.

With a firm gesture, he placed both hands on the other's hips, his thumbs tentatively daring to
advance under the waistband of his light blue boxershorts. It was something new between them,
seeing each other in normal light, in a normal place. Maybe he had seen the other's body before,
had touched him before and knew how the other's skin felt under his fingers.

Still, this felt like the world had turned upside down: ridiculously common things like the smell of
softener in the sheets and the new clothes on the god's body became exciting and erotic in a way he
would not have thought possible before.

“We haven't celebrated our victory yet.”, Tony stated, but his gaze had already dropped from Loki's
face to linger further south.

With a slowly growing hunger, he followed the trail of his hands as they ran down Loki's thighs,
the lean strong muscles under his way too pale skin, the thin layer of barely visible hair. Then, he
wandered up, his fingers peaking into the boxers again until he scratched over the soft skin on the
inside of the god's thighs.

He did not bother to suppress a smile when he felt a shudder running through Loki.

“Take your shirt off.”

Loki chuckled at the demand.

“A little bit of food and you're getting eager.”

A grin accompanied his answer, yet the trickster complied to the his wish without objections and
rid himself of his shirt, throwing the piece of clothing carelessly on the ground.

Tony's eyes wandered over the exposed body above him with a sudden hunger, the urge to touch
Loki and cover him whole greatly intensified. Nothing in this world he wanted more than simply
devour Loki on the spot, no matter the circumstances, no matter the troubles it could cause.
His hand trailed over the flat, yet defined muscles on Loki's abdomen, feeling out of touch with reality still, not quite able to grasp that this moment was real.

With a sly smile, Loki leaned forward, whispering in his ear with a voice that was like honey and managed to increase the room temperature of about 50°F at least.

“I feel greatly tempted to just rip your clothing off your body, but the classic way will do for now.”

He was a little too distracted to notice the other's hands on the hem of his shirt until the god pushed it over his head. The god took in the appearance beneath him for a few seconds, his gaze telling that it obviously pleased him to a great amount.

Then his hands ran down the side's of his own body, before his thumbs disappeared under the waistband of his shorts, halted there for a tiny teasing moment, before he dug them down in one slow movement, exposing his already half-hard member to Tony.

"Mmmh.."

Tony made a pleased humming noise, immediately letting his hand slide down the other's torso to enclose the hot shaft with his palm. Banished in the position of the spectator, he enjoyed to take action nonetheless, pumping the god's erection in a slow, relaxed motion. He watched with intent as the soft flesh filled with blood from his movements and Loki's body started a barely sensible rocking against his touch as they established a slow rhythm.

All the time, Loki's ass rubbed over his crotch, creating warmth and friction and sparking a fire within his body that would not be so easily satisfied.

They were locking eyes now, both aflame but not overwhelmed by lust, enjoying the pleasure they could cause each other, going slow for once, just because they could.

It was not cold here, there was no need to hurry and the door was locked. In fact, Tony had not once thought about the others yet, he had not even wondered what time it was, given the fairly high position of the sun.

His thoughts were occupied by different matters, his gaze drawn to Loki's face, to the strands of hair falling in front of his eyes, his pupils dilated and of a warm rich darkness with which Tony had never seen him look at anybody but him.

He removed his hand for a second to spit in the inside of his palm, then returned to grab Loki's cock, squeezing it slightly before he began to slick it with his saliva, his thumb rubbing over the sensitive head once, then twice, forcing the first breathed gasp from the god. Their gazes were locked, still, and a challenging smirk appeared in the inventor's eyes once he had made the other's breath stutter the first time.

Now, he brought his left hand together with his right, offering a tight space for the god to thrust into and oh, how willingly Loki took this offer. Increasing the power of his small thrusts, Loki pushed his cock in the slippery form of Tony's hands and only now their eye-contact broke when he closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

In the back of his mind, Tony noticed that he had been holding his breath in the attempt to keep still and keep Loki doing, but remaining motionless became unbearable now. Trying to create some more friction and complying with the need of his throbbing hard-one still trapped within the fabric of his boxers, his hips urged upwards, pushing against Loki's ass.

Eyes never leaving his face, Loki seemed to have got the not so subtle hint and let himself fall back a little, his hips going in a slow rhythm, pushing forward into the other's hands, his backside rubbing over the strain in Tony's boxers.

The heat inside his body was building only slowly, yet the engineer enjoyed the moment nevertheless, but eventually, he could not wait any longer. Interrupting his stroking movements,
one of his hands grabbed for Loki's exposed backside – his sharp nails dug into his skin, but the god seemed to enjoy it - while with the other he tried to get rid of his own shorts as quickly as possible.

A moment later, the hot, wet tip of his cock pressed in the cleft of Loki's ass, not entering yet, but moving slowly, sliding up and down over the sensitive skin a few times. It was merely the pretaste of what was to follow - and it was just not enough anymore.

With both of his hands firmly on Loki's ass, Tony pushed himself upwards into a sitting position. Still straddled by Loki, their bodies had been pushed closer together and he could feel the warmth radiating from him.

Just for him to take, just at eye-sight was Loki's neck, and Tony took his time, exploring every inch of skin, biting under his ear and trailing kisses along his jawline and neck. The god's eyes fluttered shut as he leaned back his head, his mouth open for breathy little gasps leaving his lips.

The entire time, the god kept rocking his hips against his cock in small motions, increasing their both desire slowly but steadily.

"You can be such a tease.", Tony muttered into Loki's ear, biting ever so lightly in the soft flesh of his earlobe. He did not really mean it, though, since having Loki in his lap, naked and panting with growing enthusiasm, was all the motivation he needed to take down yet another Chitauri squadron.

"Oh, look who is speaking."

The god's answer was accompanied by an amused chuckle and the inventor could feel his body vibrate from it. They were close now, but of a different kind than they had been the times before.

The position of their bodies was more intimate with their chests almost brought together and Loki in his lap, his erection rubbing against Tony's abdomen where it left a trail of warm liquid. When he looked up, he could see Loki's face, the defined forms of his cheekbones and nose outlined by the sunlight from outside.

It was not the first time Tony thought him to be beautiful and for a short moment, the fear, that their mission would make encounters like this impossible, was real.

His left still grabbing the side of Loki's ass, guiding his movements like he wanted them to be, he took his other to caress the side of his face. Having his thumb run along his jawline, he eventually brought them to the god's slightly parted lips, opening them with careful but urgent pressure. The smart boy he was, Loki knew where this was going and for him, it obviously was not going fast enough.

His hands got hold of Tony's wrist, bringing two of his fingers close to his mouth. Tony watched, torn apart between bathing in Loki's gaze with which he devoured him or taking in that spectacle which was the devilish work of the god's mouth.

His tongue flicked out, licking a wet line along the length of his middle finger, before it tentatively sucked on the tip of them, as if testing their taste. Then, he parted his lips further and let both fingers glide in, letting his tongue swirl around them and wetting them more than thoroughly.

For a few seconds, Tony forgot to move.

Loki took his fingers entirely in his mouth now, moving his head slightly up and down and casting his eyes down, only sometimes flickering over to Tony with a hungry expression.

The inventor felt paralyzed, but he enjoyed it, the knowledge that another person held such power over him was arousing.

With a slight movement of his hand around his wrist, the god removed the fingers from his mouth, licking their tip with one last playful flick of his tongue.
When he licked his lips another time, he knew that it was nothing but show for him, but it sent a shiver down his spine nonetheless. Tony knew exactly what he was doing when Loki took one hand to guide his fingers towards his backside and then pressed them against the spot where he desired them most.

With that, the rigor fell off Tony and the greedy glittering was back in his eyes. Unwilling to let this teasing continue any longer, he increased the pressure ever so slightly, until his two wet fingers pressed inside.

They went in to the second knuckle first, but Loki was as eager as Tony felt, pushing himself down on his fingers until they fully disappeared into his tight hole.

With a caution he soon lost, he pulled back and pushed in again, soon fingering Loki in a steady rhythm. The god met his thrusts, his hips rolling in fluid movements until he threw his head back, exposing his vulnerable neck and to Tony's hungry eyes.

Eventually, the god's breath hitched and he had to press his head into the crook of Tony's neck to muffle the noise. A smirk flickered on Tony's lips, but froze when Loki rose his head again, licking the shell of his ear.

A shudder ran through his body and from the breath on his ear, the genius could tell that Loki was grinning.

“Fuck me, Tony.”, the god whispered, voice husky and deep.

Loki’s words went straight into his cock, hard and ready and reminding him that even if he had the leisure to take his time, one had to know when to act. Nevertheless, a grin crept on his face as he slowly drew his fingers out of the god's slick opening.

"How come I never really got to appreciate you can be so slutty..?"

His hands slid under Loki's thighs, urging him to move upwards only a little. Without a word, the other complied and adjusted himself over his cock, his hands lingering on Tony's shoulders, lose and gentle now, but soon to be drawing bloody lines on his skin. The tip of his erection pressed against Loki's entrance, precum already gathering on the slit. It was an almost painful exercise in patience with the physical knowledge that it just needed the god to lower his weight for his cock to impale him. It did not stop him from answering his own question, though.

"Ah, yeah, right, we were kind of busy."

Only the faintest impulse of touch from Tony's side and the body on top of him lowered himself onto his lap. A slow, fluid motion and he was engulfed by Loki's warmth, by the tight heat of his body until he was buried inside of him all the way.

His eyes went wide for a second, then fluttered shut as a throaty groan escaped his lips.

"Aaah, fuckkk!"

The word had not left his mouth completely when suddenly, there were Loki's fingers on his lips to silence him.

"Shhh. You don't want them to hear us, do you?"

Loki's teasing remark only caused a breathless grin from Tony's side, a grin that was wiped of his face the moment the god rolled his hips and forced another groan out of him.

Soon, Loki found a steady rhythm in which he moved his hips. Slow and sensual at first, he rocked his body up and down, kissing Tony at the same time. Their hot breaths mingled together as they
both tried to get the upper hand but none of them succeeded. The genius' lips were prickling from their intense kissing and when he looked at Loki, the god's face was equally flushed. Eventually, Tony managed to synchronize his thrusts to Loki's movements, keeping his hands on the other's hips with a firm grip and their bodies melted together in a perfect choreography.

Their foreheads were leaning against each other, he could feel Loki's breath, but he had his eyes closed, enjoying nothing but the intimacy of their bodies together. Unlike the times before, their fucking was a nearly silent affair. Grown out of the necessity to remain quiet, the barely audible panting and breathing soon got a different feeling altogether. The noises he made were meant for no one but Loki, while the god's quiet whispers were audible for no other than him.

It did not need long until there was a film of sweat between their bodies and the whole thing became messier and messier. Tony slid in and out of Loki effortlessly now, making the god's breath hitch every time he pressed deep inside again with fluid thrusts.

Further and further, Loki rode himself to ecstasy on top of him the sound of his body smacking down on Tony's cock the loudest noise in the room. Their panting became more erratic with every thrust, silent choked breathing in the attempt to remain quiet, but it was not enough for Tony. He felt the sweet heat accumulating in his body and the urge to thrust into the god harder, with force, clouded his mind and almost made him forget that they were not alone.

With growing desire, the caresses became less gentle and languid and the inventor's lips ghosted along the side of Loki's neck, hot breath on his pale skin, his teeth scraping over the line of his collarbone. He needed to occupy his mouth with a different task so that no suspicious noises would leave this room. When he bit down on the soft skin right beneath it, Loki muffled his moan in Tony's hair and his body went rigid for a second.

A quick grin flashed over his features, then, the engineer's grip around Loki's hips came off and he moved down, grabbing the firm taut flesh of his ass, his nails digging into the skin as he guided the god's body into a more fierce rhythm. He wanted to feel more of him, the passivity of his position was beginning to drive him crazy as need overtook the course of his actions. Loki's hands found their way to his shoulders and neck for support, his hips slamming down again and again, and their eyes met for a second, the god's face deliciously reddened from pleasure, almost nothing reminding of his condition from the night before.

Unable to hold back any longer, Tony removed his hands and then put them on Loki's chest, pushing him down on his back in one imperious movement, their bodies never breaking apart their delicious connection. Now at a better angle, Tony started thrusting into the god with all force he had had to hold back and the trickster's legs folded around his hips almost automatically, pressing him closer still. The sheer physical power of two bodies slamming together in uncontrolled frenzy forced audible gasps from Loki, muffled only by his own fingers he bit into. His eyes fluttered shut as he let Tony fuck him closer and closer to his orgasm, thrusts fast and sharp, until his own climax threatened to overwhelm him.

A shuddering breath, then the feeling of losing control over his thoughts and body and suddenly, Loki's body clenching around him as he came with a silenced moan, finally brought Tony over the edge. He rode them both through orgasm, until he had spent himself inside of the god completely, leaving them both a sticky hot mess.

This was exactly what he had needed after the strain of the battle the day before.
Once his orgasm had faded out, Tony rolled off of Loki, his breath still going a little ragged from
the exhaustion. Still, this was the best way to start a day and he felt almost ready to fall back
asleep.

From his side, Loki suddenly moved forward and closed the small distance between them again.
His lips pressed against Tony and the inventor smiled in the kiss. If this was going on like that, he
would not leave the bed today at all.
They spent a while like this, kissing and nuzzling the other just because they had the time for it and
after a few minutes, without noticing it, they both fell back asleep.

Not for long, though, and when Tony eventually woke up again, the condition of his body and icky
skin made him throw over his plans of staying in bed. Trying not to disturb Loki, he started
climbing out of the bed, but seemingly failed when he heard the other made a displeased sound.

“Just going for a shower.”, the inventor said with a smile, “Feel free to join me.”

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One shower later - now that were to their avail, Loki could barely get enough of the clean water
running over his skin – they were both dressed again and ready to face more unpleasant matters
than each other's presence. Five annoying individuals downstairs, to be more precise, who would
probably start bugging them with questions the moment they entered the scene, as if it was their
right after they had been provided with the most basic goods to feel whole again.

Yet, when Loki opened the door that lead out into the hallway, the house was entirely silent.

Sunlight was streaming through a window, showing every tiny dust particle in the air and on the
floor around him. When he listened closely, he could even hear the faint noise of traffic and the
more distant rush of the ocean from outside.
The absence of human voices was striking, not even steps or the rustling of fabric could be heard.

“Seems we've got the run of the place.”

A pleased smile spread on Tony's face once he had left their room and noticed the absence of his
former teammates, too.

“Maybe they're planning an assault on us.”, Loki responded, looking out of the window for an
potential evidence of this theory, but was pulled back by Tony.

“Don't be so paranoid. They're not stupid, they all know who would come off on the short end.
Let's go downstairs, we have a date with the fridge.”

More or less gently, Tony tugged Loki along and into the kitchen where he started plucking all
kinds of food from the fridge. The god could do nothing but watch and accept what was shoved
into his hands while Tony carried the rest.
In a matter of minutes, they turned the coffee table in the living room into a mess, flowing over
from opened and half-eaten packages of foods of all kind.

The second he had found it lying left behind on the couch, Tony had made Loki wear a gray
hoodie, even though it was slightly too big for him and its front was adorned with the emblem of
Captain America's shield.
Well, he would let Tony have his fun for now – the human insisted that he looked absolutely cute
in it, and they did not have a lot of fun for the past weeks.

Breakfast was as decadent and luxurious as it could be, at least compared to the breakfast they had
eaten during the past weeks. Their manners had suffered greatly during that time as well, but there was no one there to judge.

Tony had no qualms about ripping open every package he got into his hands and taking a little bit of everything, may it be only a single slice of cheese.

Loki too did not withhold his appetite. A jar of honey had found its way into his hands, and he was licking the sweet liquid of the fingers he dipped into it. He was sure his mother would scold him for this behavior, but she was worlds away and did not need to see her misfit of an adopted soon eating like an uneducated stray.

Tony seemed to be entirely drawn towards a steaming hot and dark liquid, which he just ominously described as 'divine nectar'. Loki, after having taken a sip, found the bitter taste nothing but an offense to his senses and did not even want to hear anything about the stories Tony had to tell in which coffee – as was its actual name – had saved his life.

The idyll they were eating in was only temporary, they both knew this. As if they had come to a silent agreement, they would take as much with them as they could before they would have to depart again.

Nobody knew how the things would develop and if there would be occasions like this in the near future.

When they were almost done with their excessive breakfast, the god nestled in the corner of the couch, knees drawn to his body, his wet hair causing dark gray stains on the Captain America shirt Tony had made him wear.

Looking at the two of them now, sitting here on this couch, one got the faint impression of what it could be like once they had been successful.

IF they would kill Thanos without getting wiped out of existence before they got even close, IF the world would fully appreciate that they were in fact on the good side, IF Loki would not fall victim to the Tesseract's power burning through his insides before.

Those were quite a lot of "if"s and the probability to have them all erased was somewhere close to zero, but the sun outside made him forget the darkness around for a while.

Just for a while - they had earned themselves a while.

Tony leaned back against the backrest, shifted his position a few times while still trying to prevent his coffee mug from spilling its contents all over both of them, until he was lounging in the corner between couch and Loki's legs, looking as happy like a cat in the sun.

They enjoyed each other's presence for a few silent minutes, then the engineer spotted a remote on the table. Gesturing towards it, he made Loki taking pity on him and handing it over, although he enjoyed the calmness around them.

He let Tony turn on the flat device at the other side of the room, though. If it pleased him, Loki would not object.

Quietly chewing a piece of apple his attention was caught by the moving pictures of talking humans, a never ending flow of information, one message more depressing than the other. His formerly neutral attitude towards the device turned into a faint aversion.

"Is that necessary? We have seen it with our own eyes, there is no need to look at it on the screen as well... put on something else, I know that there is more than one channel."

Yet, Tony did not comply, only waved him off with an almost annoyed expression, apparently intensively listening to whatever the woman was saying on the screen. Something about the plans of the Japanese government on how to proceed about the alien attacks - nothing of their concern.

The god made an irritated huff and scrambled out of his enclosed position at the corner of the
couch to take hold of the remote in Tony's hand.
Of course, the human was far from giving up his power over it, he was too absorbed by the screen to actually acknowledge the god. Only when Loki managed to plug the remote out of Tony's grasp and changed the channel – the screen was now showing the view of a great, grassy scape, crowded by all kind of wild animals (were that white horses with black stripes?) - the inventor's attention was back on him.

"What are you trying to prove?"

Tony's face was dead-pan, yet despite the harsh interruption, Loki knew he was far from taking this serious.
There was a moment of tensed silence between them, then the other's hand snapped for the remote. Loki was faster and the device was out of reach before he had a chance to grab it. The god smirked, holding it just far away enough so that Tony was unable to get a hold of it without doing some weird contortions.

It might have been considered a desperate move, but seemingly, the end justified the means in this case: With a fast movement, the mortal was half over Loki's body, fast enough to grab his wrist. Yet, when he reached out to take the device out of his trapped hand, Loki's free hand got hold of the other's limb with no chance of letting go.

"Give me something in return and I might give it back to you.", Loki murmured in a challenging tone.

Without a second hesitation from the other, he got the desired reward in form of a slightly harsh, yet intimate kiss. He let go of the Tony's hand to put his arm around his chest, pulling him closer. Loki intensified the kiss for a short moment, savoring the other's presence, which right now, made him feel slightly light-headed.
Then, after a few seconds, he released the remote as well as the human from his hold, but before he could enjoy the sight of a happy Tony switching the channel back to its original state, a faint noise made his head spin around to one of the doors.

Of course, it had been too much to expect that they could wander in here, fool around on the sofa and have nobody noticing it. Even if Banner had only walked in not more than a second ago, every attempt to hide what they had been doing would be ridiculous.

Tony was still on top of Loki, seated between his outstretched legs and chest to chest with him, his face looking slightly flushed.
No, there was no chance to pretend that they had done anything else.

Tony too had frozen in his position for a second, not seeing the person on the door but knowing there was one.
Immediately the human let go of Loki and his grip did not hold him there any longer as well. The god's eyes were wide and radiant, the panic in them having turned into a dangerous form of warning glare, keeping Banner fixed in his place.
It bought Tony enough time to get off Loki's lap with as much grace as he could apparently muster, bringing a decent amount of space between him and the god. Loki's heart was beating loudly and he heard the blood rushing in his ears when he watched Tony turning around to face Banner.

His face had changed so quickly that even for Loki, it looked like the one of another person. Everything light and calm about Tony had fallen off him, his soft side, vulnerable to whatever comments he was about to hear hidden behind a cold mask now. His eyes were dark and penetrating, daring the other human to so much as to open his mouth – Loki knew he was ready to snap at anybody who would be stupid enough to say something wrong.
It was in this moment that the rest poured in.

Barton first, squeezing through the door-frame Banner was still blocking, followed by Rogers. Where the rest was remained unknown, but three people were already too much. The archer was the first to say something, although the nature of the odd situation they were in was a mystery to him.

"Enjoying your stay, apparently?", he said with a grumpy face, nodding into the direction of the screen which was still running.

Only when nobody answered – nobody, except for Rogers, even moved - he frowned and looked back and forth between the three of them, something like suspicion appearing on his features.

"What happened here? Bruce, what happened?"

One could see that the gears were turning in Banner's head: the question whether this situation would erupt into a full drawn-out drama or fade into nothingness depended on his decision alone.

Then, he eventually answered:

"Nothing... I was just surprised about the mess they made."

Relief flooded through Loki, but he had no time to enjoy it or think of what might happened once this particular situation was over.

Barton as well as Rogers seemed to be persuaded by the doctor's words, and indeed, it was quite a sight in what they had turned the coffee table – open packages of cheese, bread and several jars were spread all over it.

The Captain's mood seemed to decrease drastically as he took in the spectacle in front of him, thankfully finding a new topic to rant about so that whatever else Banner could have said was nipped in the bud.

"Are you serious?"

With a few strides the Captain had passed over to the couch and picked up an empty paper-wrapping that had been carelessly thrown to the ground to Tony's feet.

"That was meant for all of us. Have you any idea how difficult it is nowadays to get a piece of meat?"

He showed the inventor the empty package which had been filled with a piece of smoked ham, but Tony did barely look at it. Loki could fathom quite well that there were other things concerning him.

Clint too seemed to be displeased about the loss of the meat – not that Loki would care, he had been as eager as Tony to eat it – but that was it. The archer left the room, while Rogers stayed with that annoyed expression on his face, apparently enjoying himself in the role of a lecturer. He was rummaging through the packages of food on the table, trying to tidy up a bit and tossing the empty ones away with an unnerved sigh.

It was an almost humorous scene, to see how he cared about the food, oblivious to what was going on in the heads of the other three men in the room, all of them unusually silent.

"Did you use any cutlery at all? Who is supposed to eat that if your fingers have been all over it? Have you entirely lost your manners just because you have been away from civilization for a few
months?"

With an annoyed huff, the Captain took the food and carried what was left of it back into the kitchen. That left only Banner in the room with the two of them, who still had not said a word to them and about what he had just seen.

“I dare you.”, Tony whispered, loud enough for the other human to hear, yet not audible for anyone outside the room.

“We should leave.”, Loki murmured to Tony, aware that the situation could not get any better if they stayed in the living room – he did not like the looks that were guided in his direction, least of all the ones Banner were giving him.
It was full of disdain, a disdain Loki had not seen from him before.

The god got up from the couch and gently tugged at Tony's arm, getting the inventor to stand up from his place on the sofa. Yet, removing him from the room was not so easy. Still gently, yet with determination, he pulled him towards the door.
Tony's eyes remained fixated on Banner's face, not leaving it the whole way, somehow trying to force some kind of promise out of him with the sheer intensity of his gaze.

“No. A. Word.”, he hissed again, but the doctor did not answer and only when they were out of the room, the mortal turned around to face Loki.

“He won't stay quiet. They will use it for their advantage, dollars to doughnuts.”

“What a loyal band of friends you have.”, Loki responded smugly, throwing a suspicious glance over Tony's shoulder towards the kitchen.

“Let us leave for today, I can not stand their gazes any longer. They despise me.”, he added, less amused now.

The entrance door was not far away and with another gentle tug, Loki directed Tony towards it. The human just stopped for a short moment, putting on a pair of shoes he found near the doors – a pair of worn, brown boots, definitely not his, but they seemed to fit – then they were out of the house and on the street.

Outside, the sun seemed to be even brighter. The sky above was clear, except for a few scattered clouds, a mild wind from the ocean was refreshing the sun-heated air.
The asphalt of the street felt warm beneath Loki's feet, the sensation strange after months spent in the colder North.
They walked in silence, side by side, following the street that would lead them to the nearby ocean.

It was difficult to shake of the tension from back in the house, not to return and make sure that their secret would remain secret. Even though nobody said so, the thoughts were buzzing in their heads, impossible to shut up.
What had been a refuge, a temporary shelter and the last bastion of safety before the decisive fight now was poisoned with too much knowledge and too little trust as well.

“It's kind of empty around here. What day of the week do we have?””, Tony eventually asked into the silence when they were already close to the water.

“That's a question I've not thought about for a very long time…”, Loki answered, then cast his eyes to the blue of the wide water.

“You know, the ocean here looks much more inviting than in New York.”
“True thing. Why do you think did I build my house here?”

They both fell silent again, the noise of waves and seagulls the only thing audible for a while. Loki’s thoughts drifted back to the house, wondering whether Banner had already told everyone of the outrageous discovery he had just made. He imagined the heated discussions and insults directed at his person. If they would blame someone, it would be him.

Still, Loki could not pretend that he cared what this bunch of humans and that blond cad thought about him. He had more important matters to attend to – if necessary, they could leave just like that. They had survived with less, to leave now would not be much of a sacrifice.

Everything was depending on the situation they would be faced with upon returning to the house. For now, Loki was perfectly content with staying away from them all.

Chapter End Notes

Urgh, it's carnival again, and it's noisy.
No, I won't dress up and get drunk.

I have exams to write...and a fanfiction.

Anyway, here is a slightly fluffier chapter. The two have definitely earned themselves a little bit of snuggling in a warm bed :)


Usually, Bruce was not the person for insomnia, but this evening, he was tossing and turning in his bed without being able to drift into sleep. He had not commented on what he had seen this noon. He had kept it secret for a reason he could still not quite fathom, not even now, after hours of wrapping his mind around it.

Of everything he had expected to happen in his absence, this was a possibility he had not thought of. In retrospection, he could not even find a logical explanation that he had ruled out any romantic developments from the beginning. He had not thought about it simply because it did not fit the usual pattern. If he thought about it now, however, it all matched perfectly well.

Loki was a trickster – THE trickster. To gain the outcome he desired, he manipulated and cheated like no other. He was a deceiver, a schemer, always five steps ahead of you, calculating the reactions of people like brokers calculated the rise and fall of stocks. Lies left his mouth so fluently that those who lacked the insight into human nature would always fall for him. They knew that, everybody knew it, including Tony.

Yet, Tony was capable of this sort of insight into human nature, although he often appeared like he was not. He was intelligent enough to see through this web of lies Loki spun around his mind and he never took something on trust.

At least, that was how the inventor had been before Pepper's death.

After her death had torn a hole in his life, his only aim had been to fill that hole with something again – no matter with what. For some time, it had been alcohol, but then one day, Loki had appeared in his living room and as it had turned out, he had been clever enough to appear like he fitted that hole perfectly.

Because that was what was happening here, at least in Bruce's eyes: Loki was playing Tony. The god brazenly used him for his own purposes and the genius happily complied. He threw away his former life, he gave him his knowledge, his abilities and even put his own safety behind that of Loki's in exchange for some brilliantly faked affection.

There was another possibility, of course. Technically, the love – love? Was that love? He had no idea what had happened between the two in the time they had been alone – could be mutual. Perhaps in the months spent depending on each other for survival, sharing confined space and limited resources, something had grown between those unlike men.

The doctor could not believe in this variation – even though he wished he could. He had seen too much of the ugly parts of the world and the disgusting parts of human nature to believe that a god known for his disastrous deceptions would be any better.

After a few hours of restless half-sleep, Bruce finally decided to just leave it and folded back the blanket to get out of bed. Although he was not sure what exactly, he was sure that he had to do something. He had to tell somebody, at least, and get a second opinion. However, a look at the clock told him that it was very unlikely to find somebody awake: it was half past 6 in the morning, the light from outside not strong enough to shine through the curtains yet.
Putting on his glasses and a pullover, he tried to think of the best person to talk to. Steve, probably. Or Natasha, if he wanted a completely unbiased answer.

For a few seconds, he hesitated with his hand on the doorknob, then, with a deep sigh, he opened the door of his room and stepped out on the hallway.

In front of Steve's door, he hesitated again, but then knocked three times, so polite and quiet that it was probably not even audible for the man inside. Yet, only a second later, he heard the familiar voice from behind the door, asking him in.

When Bruce entered, Steve was awake, but still sitting in his bed. The blonde pushed a few strands of hair from his face and looked at him with a mixture of surprise and friendliness. Only now it occurred to him that he was still wearing nothing but his pajamas and that for Steve, it might probably look a bit odd, yet it was too late, now. Also, there were more important things than clothing – and besides, the supersoldier did not even wear a shirt.

As cautious as possible, the doctor closed the door and stepped a bit further into the room.

"What is it?", Steve asked, reaching to the side of his bed for his shirt, putting it over his head for sheer decency.

Bruce still hesitated, thankful for the time it took the other to get dressed, so that he could choose his words more wisely. Eventually, he sat down on the chair opposite the bed, his gaze stuck somewhere on the wooden pattern on the floor, before he looked up to Steve.

“It's about Tony.”

He made a pregnant pause, although he could be assured of the other's attention anyway, then Bruce continued:

“I saw him and Loki today on the couch... you know, when we returned. Before you and Clint came in, I walked in on them. They were kissing.”

“What?!”

It was a quite a new sight to witness how, for a second, Steve Rogers completely lost control of his facial muscles. He seemed to struggle to regain composure, then cleared his throat and went for another attempt, this time obviously trying to sound more articulate. He failed miserably, though.

“What- you mean they are...?”

"I don't know what they are, that's why I'm here. I don't know what to make of it."

Bruce tried a smile to ease that more than slightly awkward situation, but his face felt like he was doing some ridiculous looking grimace, so he returned to seriousness again. He knew that it would probably be hard for Steve to even begin to accept a fact like this - Bruce had needed all night for it - but he needed the other's judgment.

"You are sure of what you saw? I mean, I never thought Tony to be... well, anyway, and.. with Loki? After all what has happened?"

Despite looking very much awake now, the supersoldier looked utterly helpless in dealing with this information. Bruce felt it was his duty to be a little more of help, although all of what he knew were not more than speculations as well.
"I think that Loki is using him. You know, his... loneliness. And his anger."

While Bruce started to expound his theory, Steve left his bed and started to dress himself hurriedly, listening with great interest all the time. The eagerness was contagious somehow, and the scientist felt himself talking faster and faster, watching Steve prepare himself for - for what exactly? Such scandalous knowledge seemed to fuel one with a strange nervous energy, yet in the end, he could think of nothing they could do. When he concluded, the other had put on some jeans and had combed his hair, making Bruce feel even more out of place with his pajamas.

"So, that's what I think, at least. I just don't know what we can do about it, because you know Tony."

"That's why we will confront them, openly."

Now it was Bruce's turn to sound a little dumb.

"What? I mean - now?!"

"Right now."

With that, Steve was out of the door, obviously expecting Bruce to follow him which he did, in lack of anything better to do. He highly doubted that an open confrontation - together with Loki! - would be a good idea at all, but the Captain seemed determined to make them lay their cards on the table. Or, perhaps, he just wanted to have visual proof of what Bruce had just told him.

Of course, they should have expected that it would not be easy to get into Tony's room. The door was locked, and after several futile attempts to open it, Steve went to fetch a second key. Eventually, the lock opened with a clicking sound and turned the knob. Although he knew what he had seen, Bruce had no idea what they would see now and the Captain's anticipation was making him nervous.

Additionally, he knew that it was far off anything appropriate, to invade someone's privacy like that, but despite his bad conscience, he knew that the circumstances demanded an action.

Quietly, the door fell open, although it was hard to imagine that whoever was inside the room – if Tony alone or both men together – were still asleep after all the noise they had made.

Yet surprisingly, it was quiet and dark inside. The only light was shining through the gaps in the blind and at least to Bruce's eyes, there were no movements visible. It took some time to even discover someone in the bed, but when he squinted his eyes, he saw it.

Somewhere in the middle, there was a bulge in the blanket, roughly the shape of a human body.

No, not one body, but two.

Two bodies wrapped so tightly into each other's arms that they would have fit in a sleeping bag together.

One could see Tony's head peaking out from under the blanket, while Loki was almost entirely covered by it, with the inventor's arms holding him close, his head pressed into the crook of the other's neck.

They were both fast asleep, breathing quietly – if not for the circumstances, this image could be considered as one of the most peaceful things Bruce had seen recently.

He somehow froze in the doorframe, unable to intrude in this peaceful scenery any further than
they already had. It did not feel right to be here, somehow, because what they saw there looked just too genuine. A sleeping person could not act affectionate or caring, a sleeping person merely slept, without the ability to control his body in any way.

It was especially strange to see Loki in a position like this, with his features so calm and relaxed. It made him look younger and vulnerable somehow and for a second, the doctor wondered if this was what Tony believed Loki to be behind his biting facade.

It did not even look like Loki there, it looked like a different person entirely. For a moment, all those months he had neither seen Tony nor Loki nor experienced anything what had happened between them weighed down on him and made him doubt. Perhaps there was a possibility, after all, even if the odds were small, that something real and true could...?

Yet, this doubt was shattered when Steve dashed forward, took one corner of the blanket and tore them to the side in a less than gentle movement, a glimpse of his military drill becoming visible.

Loki, still soundly sleeping a second ago, startled up from the cold airflow of the removed blanket, his body in a attacking position, tense in the anticipation to fight and within a wink of an eye, the air was sizzling with a magic static, until he could make out who the hostile element was exactly.

Tony, on the other hand, was not quite as fast, but once he had at least partly understood what was going on, he immediately proceeded to damage containment, slinging his arm around the god's waist in a firm, determined grip to hold him back in whatever he might do.

It had all happened so fast that nobody had even been able to utter an accusation or a word of explanation.

"What the FUCK do you want?!"

Tony's words were an eruption of spiteful anger, his voice still hoarse from sleeping and his hair a tousled mess - nevertheless, Bruce did not doubt that he would attack if he had to. The bluish glow around Loki's fingertips did not cease, not even now, when there was still no open attack coming.

"Let's turn this around: What are you two doing here?!!"

Steve sounded alarmed, but contained, trying to calm down the unexpectedly fierce reaction he had caused. For a second, Bruce's attention was drawn to the space beneath the bed, where a similar blue glow was emerging from.

It took him a little to realize that it was the suit, somehow activated without Tony ever giving any order to, probably controlled by his mind alone, the precocious warning system of his body. What on earth had they been doing out there in the wasteland?!

At the same time, the genius was actively tugging at Loki to get him back into a position that should probably look less threatening than the current one. The god looked as if he was ready to jump at Steve at the first opportunity, but, despite of what Bruce had heard about the outcome of their last encounter, the supersoldier seemed unafraid.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Steve? If you think that you can-“

“What is wrong with YOU, Tony? Of all the possible replacements you could have taken, you had to fall for HIM?”

Steve gestured towards Loki, who still looked as if he would happily kill them all within the next seconds. Yet for a short moment, another expression flashed over the god's face, a hurt look, as if Steve's words really had an effect on him.

Bruce did not know what to think. This was spiraling out of control way too fast again and he had a
hard time finding the right spot to interrupt them before it was too late.

Tony, did not look hurt, though, he looked angry – angry enough to make it conspicuous.

“Can you just ONCE stop putting your nose in things that have absolutely NOTHING to do with you? Do you even have any idea how much trouble you caused us by attempting again and again to get involved although your involvement is neither necessary nor desired?”

The inventor's tone was close to yelling again, meanwhile having been successful in pushing Loki back to a spot behind himself.

“Things that have nothing to do with me? Tell me, Tony, how does this have nothing to do with me? I still consider you a friend - and even if your weren't: you let yourself be played, USED by one of the most dangerous and untrustworthy persons known to this universe and you don't even realize!”

“Watch your words!”

It was the first time Loki had said anything and his hissed words were oozing with anger. Steve's gaze flickered over to him and for Bruce, it looked like he would welcome an attack with open arms right now.

This was enough.

With some effort, Bruce managed to leave the space where he had been glued to the floor until now, stepping at Steve's side to act as a support - and as a reminder that turning this into a fight would not be two against one, but two against one person and one Hulk. He really did not liked doing this, but sometimes, it helped.

"We should have a talk."

The scientist managed to lay a warning edge to his tone, but it was not as effective as it usually was. With the tempers heated like that, it would be hard to bring this down on a diplomatic level again. Yet, Steve seemed to realize that taking a step back and desisting from accusations was probably more helpful. Of course, one could not believe Tony would embrace the idea of being betrayed and lied to by the only person he seemed to be willing to trust these days.

"We should have had that talk yesterday, no, months before.", Steve added, his look still resting on Loki, as if he was trying to estimate what category of threat he was today.

"You should leave us the fuck alone and mind your own business - if your 40s mind can't deal with this, then leave! We will be gone in a minute and you never have to feel irritated by me again."

"That's not what I mean, Tony!"

It was so easy to raise voices again, but Bruce would not go with it. They needed to talk to Tony, alone - without the toxic influence of Loki. Only with them separated, they had a chance to get through to him, otherwise, he would always defend Loki.

"If you leave now, we will not let you. There will be a fight and I know that you don't want a fight among friends. I don't think that's why you went on this trip in the first place."

Even though he looked like he wanted to yell back again, the inventor remained silent for a few seconds. His eyes darted to Loki, but there did not seem to be the same kind of agreement between them that there had been before. It was obvious who of them was tired of talking and explaining
and who only pretended to be. Bruce knew that Tony cared, even though he said he did not. He knew that he did not want to fight them, if not absolutely necessary.

The dark brown eyes returned to look at Bruce, then lingered on Steve with a brooding glare.

"Get the fuck out."

"Tony!"

"I said get the fuck out! We will be downstairs in a minute."

"Not 'we', just you. Alone."

When he heard the word 'Alone', Loki's expression darkened. Being excluded did not suit him well, of course, but there was no doubt about the his negative influence. They could not have him present.

“Do you think you are in the position to make demands like that? Stop treating me like some mindless beast incapable of understanding your words!”

Steve turned around to the god, now all of his attention on him.

“But that's what you are! Last time we met, you tried to kill me, just because you had the power to do so! Every time I see you, you were doing nothing else but scheming, lying and destroying! You did absolutely nothing to gain our trust!”

“I'm fighting on your side, I've done everything to fight the ones that are attacking YOUR planet.”

“You just happen to have the same enemy as we do, but that doesn't make us allies! Just be honest one time, Loki: If the Chitauri had not changed their attitude towards you for your failure in New York, you would not give a single damn about anything that is happening here! You want nothing else than to save your own skin. Tony just happened to be in the right situation to be a tool for you! And don't forget: It was you who brought the Chitauri here in the first place.”

There was no response from the god. The blueish glow from his hands had receded, but that was no indication of what was boiling inside of him. The open hatred in his eyes made sure that, if looks could kill, Steve would be nothing but a pool of blood on the ground.

“You have absolutely no idea.”

Eventually, the god answered. His voice was low and subdued, not yelling like before, but all the more frightening - everyone in the room held their breath, Tony on his side included.

Then, with a flicker of light, Loki vanished, leaving behind a hazy blue glow.

For a short moment, Bruce feared that his teammate had gone too far and sent the god on a destructive rampage, but he quickly came to the conclusion that it was only for the best when Loki was gone for some time. He was the source for so many problems, a bit of a time-out would do them all well.

“Downstairs in 3 minutes.”, Steve said with a tone that left no room for objections, then turned around and left the room, Bruce following close by, not looking back at the man they left on the bed.

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When Steve and Bruce left his room, Tony was suddenly alone.

In his rage, he did not feel realize it first, because he could not believe that Loki had vanished just like that, but when he looked around, the god did not reappear. Wherever he was, he would stay there for a little longer, leaving Tony alone with his 'friends'.

"Loki."

He waited, with growing impatience, already fiddling with his clothes he had left somewhere on the floor, his eyes screening the room for any sign of the other. There was none.

"Loki!"

What did he care if the other two could hear his yell downstairs. When he would go out of his room now, he did not want to have to think about the god's whereabouts as well. His concentration was needed for the next hour and he did not look forward to bother about Loki half the time.

How naive of him, thinking they would just walk in here, feed themselves, sleep in the beds they were provided with and then walk out again to kill some titan without a truckload of problems to appear on the way. He should not have come here. They were better of alone, just the two of them.

Halfway clothed again, he splashed himself some water in his face and drank a few handful, then he hurried downstairs. Even though Loki had apparently decided to stay out of this, Tony certainly had to say a few things. He was still steaming with anger, his face flushed from adrenaline, his hands clenched into fists with so much force that his knuckles turned white.

When he reached the living room, he found them both waiting for him, conversing in lowered voices, but immediately interrupting their talk to turn around the second they heard him approaching.

At the sight of Bruce, Tony spontaneously changed his plan of action and went for the scientist first, closing the distance between them with an aggressive stride, only stopping when their chests were almost touching and he could look into the gray of the other's wary eyes.

"I dared you to say a word, I dared you-

Steve's arm reached between him and Bruce, shoving Tony back in a gentle, but determined way which only triggered more opposition.

"What do you want again?! Always busting the party uninvited, Rogers, the pattern is showing. Get your hands of me."

“I was concerned about you, that's why I told him.,” Bruce tried to justify himself, yet was immediately cut off by Tony.

“You can shove your concern up your ass, that's what you can do! From where do you take that right, to tell me what's good for me and what's not?!”

He could not keep his voice calm, not even if he had actually tried, yet he took a step back to be out of Steve's reach.

“We think that Loki is only using you to get the power he desires, and that he took your situation as an opportunity. You were not like that before.”

Oh, that one was nice. From one second to another, Tony's face turned into a twisted grin and a bitter chuckle escaped his mouth.
“I wasn't like that before? Tell me, Rogers, what was I like before?”

Silence.

“If Loki had not shown up, I would be counting WORMS by now, but it's always so much easier to
grief for a failed suicide than accept people make other decisions than you do. Of course, righteous
Captain Rogers always knows what is best, no matter how limited his world-view is!”

From a silent, fuming hiss, the volume of his voice had increased as he was getting more and more
enraged with every word. He was not even interested in any intentions behind their concerns
anymore, nor that what he was saying himself did not even make sense at all.

“Stop it, Tony.”

“What, you want me to stop? You know what? Go looking for Loki, bring him back here and
apologize for the shit you said to him - then I'll stop!”

As if the situation could not have been any worse, the entrance-door suddenly opened and Clint,
Natasha and Thor entered the scene, making the limited space in the kitchen seem even more
crowded.

“What is going on here?”, Natasha asked, eying the three men in front of them, eventually stopping
at Tony.

Tony remained still, body language speaking of barely contained anger. He looked her in the eyes
for a while, knowing that she was searching for something there, some explanation and he was
pleased when she eventually turned from him to look at Steve again. A smirk crept on his face, yet
it froze to a horrified mask when the spy opened her mouth.

"Is this about his relationship with Loki?"

The genius' mouth opened in a vague attempt to say something, but he stood no chance against that
dark terrifying growl which came from deep within Thor's chest. For a second, Tony forgot what
this was all about and really thought the god would get at him now to tear his head off, but then a
grim, bitterly disappointed look was all, before he spun around on his heel and left the room, the
uneven noise of his steps becoming more and more quiet.
From inside the kitchen, there was nothing to be heard, until the thunderer's voice tore the silence
apart when he bellowed his brother's name, somewhere outside. If one would measure whose
situation was worse, Loki's or his own, it would probably be an even match.

Silence had returned to the kitchen. It was like a bomb had dropped - even the two who already
knew of it were utterly stunned.

"This is pathetic, even for you, Stark.", Clint eventually spat out, but it did not hurt Tony. His eyes
were on Natasha who looked at him without giving anything away, before she released him with a
cocked eyebrow and then turned away to leave the crowded room for a bit of space.

"He was almost sitting on your lap during the ride in the Quinjet. You're everything but subtle."

"What is this? Jersey Shore?! An intervention? You gonna beat the shit out of me now or send me
to therapy? I'm kind of confused 'cause you're sending mixed signals."

Tony had regained his ability to speak, following her out of the kitchen to be able to breath again.
He felt cornered and overwhelmed, ready to lash out on anybody, and the small room made it all
worse.
The other three followed after him, Steve already explaining again.

“This is nothing the like. We just want you to understand that your involvement with Loki won't lead to anything good. Also, we wanted answers. You did not answer before, perhaps you could enlighten us now, since we are all here: We want to know what exactly Loki wants from you, how he gained this powers - and what your intentions are.”

Steve authorial voice rang clear and loud through the room and for a moment, Tony’s gaze wandered over the different faces of the people gathered. When it fell on Bruce, the scientist looked as if he almost regretted to have said anything at all, the uproar he had caused through this single decision apparently too messy for his taste.

The inventor waited for a few moments, his jaw clenched, lips pressed together to a thin line. The thought of revealing everything what had happened, all the failures on their way, the humiliation they had endured to come this far and the sacrifices both of them had made, caused a deep genuine feeling of aversion within him. He did not want them to know all of it, not before the story had ended - with their success, of course. Hell, if they would kill Thanos, they all would be able to read about it in his autobiography.

However, they would not let him go otherwise and he would be a fool for not answering their most basic questions. Perhaps they would understand better, afterward, although he highly doubted it. At least, they would lack a proper reason to mistrust them.

"Right, folks. Answers, I have lots of those. Anybody in need of some paper? 'Cause what I will say now first is of utmost importance and I want all of you to memorize it like the name of your first girlfriend."

He threw a quick glance at Natasha, who did not even bother to act like she felt offended. When he spoke on, he did so with great effort to stay calm, trying to willingly relax his heartbeat and his temper.

"I saved Loki's life. He saved my life - several times. We trust each other. I would happily give him the shirt off my back and I strongly advise you to reconsider your opinion about him. There is no chance to win me for something without taking him in as well, so stop trying."

There was thoughtful silence following his words, but Steve had to open his mouth one more time again, of course.

"But-"

"Period.", Tony snapped in his direction, voice louder than intended, but obviously not grim enough.

"You think she would like that? Leaving for her revenge and then start some pretentious fling with the guy who is responsible for her death? Seems you got over her pretty easily."

All heads turned to Clint when he spoke, his voice casual, but dripping from subtle scorn. The archer had lounged on the wall during the conversation and even now, when Tony's glare sent daggers flying towards him, he did not look the least bit frightened.

Tony remained motionless.

That hurt, that really hurt. Partly, because it was true and something he had carefully stored in the back of his consciousness to think about in those sleepless late-night hours. Still, this was only half
of the story and he had never chose it to end like this. It had happened and it was keeping him alive after he had grieved for her for more than half a year. If he would kill Thanos, he would do so in her name - but with Loki on his side.
Barton did not know nothing of this, he had no idea that Pepper still was in his thoughts and in his dreams, and therefore, his spite should not hit home like this, but it drove the inventor up the wall.
"Fuck you, bird-boy."

He was already half-way over the room to just get hold of the archer and bang his idiot-head on the table, but in the same moment, both Natasha and Steve made a step forward to stop him. Natasha was faster, though, her body, however small, blocking the way and he knew he would probably lose a few teeth before he would get to pass her without his suit.
"Be reasonable, Tony."
"Then fucking apologize. You don't know Loki like I do."
"He was in my head, I know him."

Clint had still not stood up from his position and it made Tony furious that he was unable to get through to him.
"That was not him, back then. Those were not HIS motives."

The genius knew that nobody of them would understand what he meant with that, and yeah, if he had listened to himself without knowing as much of the god's backstory than he did, he would think that he sounded pretty brain-washed. Yet, he knew it to be true and he did not doubt it for one second.
There was a frown in Bruce's face who tried to get back to the center of the discussion, successfully directing their attention towards him.
"Then what are his motives now? What are your motives?"

With a weary smile, Tony glanced over to him. They would not apologize now, that much was certain. If not faced with solid evidence and a bunch of independent evaluations from all kinds of experts and psychiatrists, they would not apologize.
Inhaling deeply, he tried to compose himself again, watching from the corner of his eye as Natasha stepped back to stand in a less offensive way.
"He wants to regain trust by eliminating the most deathly threat to the Nine Realms which is impossible without an equally powerful weapon on his side. That's why he took the Tesseract, so that I could use its energy for the Mark Omega...and for him. That's why his magic is so strong and unbridled. It's pretty hard to get that baby to stand in line with your wishes and it took some time and several... test runs until it worked."

There was a heavy silence in the room, everybody obviously struggling to digest what he had just said. At least, they granted him the satisfaction of being adequately amazed.

When Natasha suddenly spoke, her voice was all business again. She sounded very interested now, now when this was about the cube's powers again.

“And how did you manage to access its energy? SHIELD worked years with the cube, but they never got beyond the creation of a portal – the only thing the Tesseract seemed to be capable of.”

Of course, she was still loyal to SHIELD and Fury, although she pretended to belong to Avengers.
“As if I would tell you, you would not even understand half of it anyway. Let me tell you just so much: I found a way to extract the Tesseract's energy far more efficiently than Hydra did back in the 40s - but we destroyed all the blueprints, hard-drives and machinery once we were done. It doesn't matter anyway - I'm never going to build anything alike again. Even if I would, it's all useless without the Tesseract... and I doubt that Loki has any intentions to give it away to anyone.”

It seemed like that had not been the answer anybody had been hoping for, although Tony could not imagine what else they had expected.

“And what do you think we should do with you now? We can't let you go like that.”

“I'm afraid you have to. You can't keep us here by force.”

There was no challenge in Tony's words any longer – it was just a statement, matter of fact, and they all knew.
Yet, the answer that followed came from a direction he had not expected it to come from and from a person he had not talked to for a long time.

“Then, perhaps, we should join forces again.”

Chapter End Notes

Gawd I know D:
Please don't hate Steve, there is only so much shit a person can take...
(But feel free to rant about his behavior if you want to xD)
Harsh, golden cliffs and the wide expanse of the ocean in front of him, the edges of the city in his back, Loki's way had carried him to the shore of the great Midgardian sea, where the noise of the waves could silence his own thoughts.

Leaving the scenery – although that had meant to leave Tony alone with the two other mortals – had been the best possible choice at the moment, because otherwise, Loki could not have guaranteed for anything. Those angry, hurtful and in this case entirely unjustified accusations had hit a sore spot within him, and in that moment, his muscles had already prepared for the movement that would make him jump forward and tear out the Captains throat, probably his entire head with it. One could only take a certain amount of injustice, and Loki had received more than enough of it for a dozen lifetimes.

Not only the the Captain's claim that he had been the one to bring the Chitauri to Earth – technically true, yet they would've come there anyway; maybe a few years later, but they would have come – or that he was using Tony for a selfish purpose were hurtful, but something else. The word 'replacement' echoed in his mind, and it was the one thing Loki knew to be true. Whatever he tried to tell himself, or what Tony would say, the god knew what he was to the man. A replacement, maybe an important one, but nevertheless nothing but a consolation for the loss of his original love. Tony had been so desperate that he had probably chosen everyone who had accompanied him on this journey.

And to realize that hurt.

Right now, Loki desired nothing else but solitude, to calm down his raging mind and to come to terms with another, cruel truth. Yet of course, he was not meant to have his way, as it always was. Loki felt his presence long before he even heard the steps approaching, the noise dulled by the sand covering the rocks.

"You can not keep running away from me like that, brother."

Finally, he had given Thor the perfect opportunity to confront him, away from the mortals, with no ears to hear them, no one to intervene if things were to become messy. Still, Loki did not bother to turn around to the older Asgardian. He did not really care what Thor would do, if he might just stand there, and wait for Loki to engage a conversation, or if he planned to attack Loki with a blow from Mjolnir. It did not really matter.

"No, I guess you are right. I eventually have to come to terms with my fate."

Loki heard footsteps approaching, then Thor was standing right beside him. Loki could smell him – a smell of earth, phosphor and rain, a smell that had never ceased to remind him of his home and safety – yet although Thor was so close, he made no attempt to touch Loki, or to do anything at all.

“So, did they tell you about my insidious scheme? What a cruel, cowardly and opportunist beast I am?"

“They told me nothing about you. I had my guesses about you and Tony Stark even before I saw"
you together, I only got confirmed my assumptions.”

“And what do you think of it?”, Loki asked, eventually turning around to face the Thundergod.

“I don't know what to think of it. I don't have the feeling that I know you any longer, so I can only guess. But I don't think that you are are taking advantage.”

“Then you are the only one.”, Loki responded with a bitter smile, and turned around to face the ocean once again.

“Do you know what it is like, if everyone assumes you are planning nothing but the worst, incapable of anything but greed and malice? I offer my alliance, I want to fight at your side, I too made sacrifices, and everything I get in reward are insults and disdain...so tell me, why did you come here? What is it that you want from me, now that you are here? Catch me and drag me back to my cell?”

The was no response at first, only the noise of the waves crashing against the cliffs below. Loki knew that Thor was waging his words carefully – he had learned.

“No...I will be honest with you, because I know that lying to you won't be of help. When Heimdall told me about your presence here, with the Tesseract in your possession, I was of course suspicious about it and indeed expected you to be plotting something. I still think that you are hiding certain things from me, from all of us, but after seeing you I know that whatever you plan to do won't be to our disadvantage.”

This time, Loki’s movement were not controlled and slow when he turned around, staring at Thor in surprise. The other god had always be the first one to put the blame on Loki, to make him responsible for whatever had went wrong, so hearing the opposite of that honestly surprised him.

“I thought you to be dead – again. And my grief for you did not cease through the fact that I had went through it before. It was a the best message I had in over a year, to know that you are alive. If you are fighting the Chitauri, you are fighting for Asgard, for Yddrasil. You are fighting at my side once more...and if this is over, you might return to Asgard as a free man.”

All of this sounded to good to be real, too indulgent and forgiving to be believable. Loki gave nothing but a short, crippled chuckle as response, then his face turned back to an indifferent mask an he added:

“Odin would never allow it. My sentence was to last a lifetime.”

“Father is dead.”

Whatever reply had been building in Loki’s throat, it never came out. The words rang in his ears, but did not really reach his mind, because it sounded nothing but surreal to him. Then, eventually, the words unfolded their meaning, and Loki was struggling to process the flood of different emotions crashing down on him.

There had been no love left for Odin, not after the man he had once called his father had sent his mind into the abyss, closely followed by his physical form, and even less after his return to Asgard and the sentence that he had to remain caged for the sad remains of his life had been passed by him.

Still, there had been that childish part of him - however small and crippled it might have been - that had hoped for an eventual reunion, to finally get the praise for the battle he had fought in the name of Yddrasil, a battle he would win, no matter what the price was. Not even his hatred for the
Allfather had any aim now – hating the dead was for vain. Suddenly, so many things seemed to cease existing, and maybe this was not a bad thing. Maybe, one of the heavy chains that were holding him down had been shattered right now, bringing him closer to freedom.

Loki did not know if he should feel grief, malicious joy, indifference or relief.

In the end, nothing of the turmoil in his mind was showing on the outside – he knew that Thor could probably see behind the facade, but that was of no importance right now – and the only response he muttered was:

“How?”

“The Allfather used all of his magic reserves to seal the weapons vault shut, so that no one could ever again get a hold on the artifacts stored within. He was successful, but so exhausted that there was not much strength for the battle left within him. He fell through their spears.”

Loki contemplated Thor's words for a short moment. Dying to protect the weapons vault was a noble cause, yet for a king to die through the strike of a mere footsoldier not so much. Yet there was another thought that came to his mind.

“What about mother?”

“As good as can be expected under the circumstances. She assumes the throne in the time of my absence.”, the thunderer made a pause, looking Loki in the eyes with sincerity, “I'm sure that she misses you.”

Loki had not dared to think about his mother for a long time now. To hear from her, to be assured of her health and that she had thought about him filled with a pang of guilt, for he knew that he would not return very soon - if he would return at all. Still, he could bring himself to show Thor a faint smile, although the words he would speak next were not something to smile about.

“I can not return to Asgard yet, not as long as Tony is there. I can't leave him behind. And to be quiet honest, I don't know if I will ever return there. I don't want to invade a place where I'm no longer welcome.”

Thor just nodded and gave Loki a sad smile. For once he was perceptive enough to realize that Loki was right. Even if he would return victorious, the Golden City would not greet him with pride and joy – he would always remain a misfit, a threat.

They shared the silence for a few moments, waves crashing against the shore beneath them.

“It is the first time I can speak to you properly after more than two years.”

To that, Loki just chuckled and looked at the horizon. Just a year ago, he would have never let the other god come as close as this. He would have scorned him for the things he had done to him in their lifetime, twisting every well-meant word in Thor's mouth until he would drive him mad completely and their talk would end in a fight again. He could do it just now, but the urge to do so was deadened somehow.

So much had happened in those two years. Two years – nothing compared to their lifetime. Only a short glimpse of their life, yet the events during those years made any return to his former existence impossible.
Thor had thought Loki dead – two times. He had lost his brother, had found him again, only to be faced with the rapid and negative chance said brother had underwent, only too lose him again before there was even a chance of fixing things.

Loki was tired to keep up this senseless loathing for Thor, he knew that it would gain him nothing. Deep down, he had known it all the time. Thousands of years spent together, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, good years and bad years, were not suddenly erased, no matter how grave the circumstances. In the end, Loki would never be able to kill Thor – the thought of having him dead scared him more than he had been aware of.

Here, in a place were he had been met with nothing but hostility so far, his once-brother brought back memories of a sentiment he had thought lost: home. It was a good feeling, for a change.

“Does it still hurt?”

With a glance down to Thor's stiff leg, he changed the topic to matters more practical. The other only shook his head, but you could see that this was not entirely true. Even just the way he walked was indication enough that his leg would never be as it had been before.

“It's not as bad as it looks. Although you would probably just laugh it off – but you with your magic have always been a little more immortal than we are.”

“Blundering fool – I would have never let it come to that.”

They looked at each other, a sly grin playing in the corner's of Loki's mouth which made Thor's eyes lighten up. Their bantering was like a resort, so familiar that it had become ingrained. For him, the insult was less a simple affront than a reminder of what it had once been between them. Perhaps, just perhaps, could be again some time.

“I missed you, brother.”

Without a chance to evade it by ducking or backing out, the blonde god had stepped towards him and pulled him close.
Loki found his face pressed against the other's chest, the strong arms wrapped tightly around his slender frame. In the first few moments, the urge to struggle almost overwhelmed him, but then he was breathing in the familiar scent and felt the other's face nuzzle in his hair and he became strangely calm.

Their bodies remained close and Thor's warmth spread through him like the sun's on a warm summer morning. Loki closed his eyes.

“I love you, brother.”

The thunderer's voice was husky from emotion, sounding muffled in his hair, but Loki heard him anyway. He had rejected those reassurances again and again, he had laughed in the other's face every time he had dared to call him this.

Now, a violent shudder ran through his body when he fully grasped what that meant - to have a brother again.

Loki pressed closer, his arms finally finding their way around Thor's body to give him an answer. He did not say anything, afraid what would come out once he would open his mouth.

Eventually, he managed to utter:

“I love you too.”
However long he would have liked to delay their departure, eventually, they had to return to the house. Surely, their return – together, not opposing each other any longer – would cause great upheaval and might just be enough to reinstall some trust in Tony's and his good intentions. If not trust, though, then both Thor's appearance and his formidable reputation would at least grant them a bit more air to breathe.

Loki regretted how soon he would have to leave him again.

On their way back, they were walking side by side as they had so often done it before during their long lifetime, and still everything was different. They might be walking together again, but their chosen paths were still unknown and the future unpredictable.

After crossing some vegetated spots, nicely mixed in between the sandy dunes behind the lane of houses, they approached the Captain's house from the garden-side. It was audible from the outside, but upon entering through the huge glass-door at the buildings backside, the shouting and discussing from inside became impossible to ignore.

The faint feeling of calmness, that tiny spark of something good he had ventured to believe possible, quickly turned into a lurking feeling of impending danger again.

Loki only needed to hear a few words to get an idea of what was exactly was going on. The moment he caught sight of what was going on in the living-room, the god's quiet demeanor was almost blown away completely, his previous anger returning with full force.

They were all there now, their constellation clearly saying that this was a four against one. Tony looked cornered, his naturally short growth in addition to the malnourishment he had had to endure made him look even smaller in comparison to the Captain towering in front of him.

The supersoldier was apparently right in the middle of an interrogation and, judging from the look on Tony's face, asking questions the inventor was definitely not keen to answer.

Of course, Tony knew how to stand his ground, but still - it was an unfair battle.

Yet, before Loki could take a single step into the kitchen to come to Tony's aid – most likely firing up the conflict even further – Thor stepped in front of him. When he raised his voice, it echoed with the loud and authoritative tone of a king and it worked: everyone fell silent at once.

“Then, perhaps, we should join forces again.”

Five heads spun around to face the sudden intruders. Faces plastered with surprise slowly turned into expressions of growing disdain, when the first eyes found Loki.

Only Tony looked relieved to see him, yet even more surprised than the others once he sensed that something had changed in the relationship of the two god's. Loki threw him a short, reassuring glance, then he fixated his gaze back on those who posed the greater threat.

No one dared to say something at first, since Thor had an entirely different position in the group of Avengers than the Iron Man had.

Eventually, Rogers was the one who stepped forward, facing Thor.

“I really want to do just that, but it cannot see how this should be practicable. We told you what happened, you know what Loki did. He's unpredictable, and we can't rely on someone like him -

“And why did he try to kill you? Wasn't it the two of you-”, Thor's gaze roamed over Natasha and Clint,”-who were sent with the order to kill my brother as well as Tony Stark, and tried to force one into betraying the other? Those are no honorable methods either. And what about Bruce Banner? Once the beast is unleashed, he is an uncontrollable force, and still you keep him in your midst without a second thought.”
Loki could see how Banner stepped from one foot to another, obviously uncomfortable with all of
their combined attention suddenly on him, but the two assassins seemed entirely unfazed.
Still, the reserved reactions were no discourage for Thor, and he continued.

“You all have blood on your hands, you all have killed. So have I. And still - all of you got a
second chance and now, the people consider you heroes. They see in you Midgard's only true hope
for victory.
My brother deserves the same chance.”

It was quiet in the room and the tension inside Loki grew again. This was an offer they could not
reject, if they were not absolutely stupid, but who could ever be sure of that.
Quickly, he looked over to his partner, wanting to see his reaction. It was hard to tell what he
thought, since his face revealed nothing which the others could use against him. Yet, there was a
disbelieving, but triumphant gleam in his eyes.
The god was distracted again, though, when Rogers eventually turned to look at him - the first time
actually looking him in the eye, as if he tried to seek for something else there other than a
disarranged enemy. Loki answered his look without falter, keeping his expression as innocuous as
he could muster while Thor went on.

“Also, even a powerful band of mortals like you can not deny that we have to stick together in dark
times like this. All of us.”

With that, the thunderer stepped to the side, withdrawing from his position between Loki and the
Avengers in front of him. He knew what was expected of him now, yet it was still something he
did not look forward to.
He did it nonetheless – what had to be done, had to be done. Hesitantly, he stepped forward, until
he was right in front of the Captain, looking at him with a sincere expression. No sings of spite
now, no twitching in the corner of his mouth, no smirk flickering in his eyes.

They should all know that he was capable of sincerity as well.

“I know you won't trust me, but I have no intentions of betraying you. There is too much to lose,
for all of us – for me as well. I wish to fight at your side and if you accept my offer, I will pledge
my alliance to you.”

Still not having overcome his reluctance entirely, Loki reached out, offering his hand in the typical
mortal gesture used to seal a contract.

Rogers seemed utterly baffled by the offering and unsure whether he should take the outstretched
hand, or ignore it and continue on the path he had chosen to go before. His head moved around to
look at the other present Avengers behind him, over Barton and Romanov, then to Banner, before
his eyes eventually stuck on Tony.
Even now, the inventor could not refrain from cocking an eyebrow, as if incredulous that the other
could even think about rejecting that offer, but fortunately kept his mouth shut.

There came no objections from either of them, so Rogers turned back to Loki. The god wondered
what was going on in the other's heads, how Barton liked the outcome of this or what the spy
expected to gain from that deal. It would probably remain a mystery to him, but in the end, it was
of no importance.

What was important was their aim and if joining forces with a group of mortals he despised would
enable to reach this goal more easily, he would do so.

The supersoldier stared Loki in the eyes, as if he could force him to stick to his own words through
the power of his gaze alone. Then eventually, he reached out and took Loki’s hand in a firm grip, shaking it to seal the promise.

“I accept your offering - but remember: This is your only chance.”

Chapter End Notes

So we thought after the shitstorm in the last chapter we should compensate it somehow :P

Uaaaah, only 8 chapters left....and 25 days to finish them x___X

Comments a very much appreciated :D
The nights within the house were always pleasantly quiet and dark, despite currently inhabiting seven vastly different people. Seven people who moved around, some more and some less noisy, seven people who talked, used the water and made the floorboards squeak. Still, one could barely hear anything of it and Loki liked to indulge in the impression that they were alone inside the building. Especially in their own room, where there was no one but him and Tony, it was as if they both had been left in their own small universe. Between white sheets there was nothing but each other's warmth.

This night, however, although as dark and calm as the previous ones spend in their current residence, nothing could have muted the only too well known sensation creeping at the edge of Loki’s mind. Not the thick walls and the silence, neither the deepness of his own slumber – not even Tony's reassuring touch could stop this feeling from pushing into his consciousness with increasing force.

Eventually, Loki awoke from his restless sleep. For a short moment, the noise of his racing heart was the only thing he heard and inwardly, he scolded himself for letting himself get carried away like this. This distress came from nowhere but his own mind, originating from the marred condition of his body and by now, he was used to it. With a low sigh, the god closed his eyes again and nestled his head into the pillows in an attempt to fall back asleep. Minutes past in which he lied there motionlessly, trying to blend out the noise of his own heartbeat and the occasional painful surges originating from the base of his skull.

Then he heard it.

There was something else, something that was filling the room with its noise from outside, barely sensible but still audible for him. Or was it only in his head, too?

The longer he focused on the noise the more intense it became. No, it definitely was not only in his head – his entire body vibrated from, the first indication of a feeling he had not felt for a long time now.

In fact, there was only one time he had felt the same thing before.

Something was prodding at the fibers of the universe, tearing at them without allowance or respect, making the great world-tree scream with agony in response. The matters of reality were shifting, being formed anew under the hands of a powerful entity, far, far away from earth.

Something was coming.

Together with that sinister certitude, another sensation set in, as if a sharp hook had been planted into his mind, pressing the thought further and further towards the forefront of his consciousness him.

'They found me.'

The idea was terrifying at first – Loki had not forgotten what it meant to be hunted through the branches of Yddrassil, driven beyond the verge of exhaustion and starvation, only a brink away
from death towards the end.

Still, it made so terribly much sense. How could he have expected to use his magic to such an extent, uncontrolled raw energy, filled with his essence and the essence of the Tesseract - on a Chitauri-Ship moreover – without the Chitauri picking up on him, like they had done it before. And now they were coming, coming to end what they had begun, to get their revenge on him and even more important – retrieve the Tesseract from him.

But this time, he would be stronger than any troop or any beast they would send after him. They could not know what they would be faced with on earth this time, they did not know what he was capable of.

The time for the long-anticipated battle was close, but he needed to act fast.

Within a second, Loki had sat up in the bed – fortunately he had went to sleep fully dressed, so there was no need for that - removed the blanket from himself and bend over to Tony, shaking the mortal to wake him from his sleep.

“Tony! Tony, wake up!”

A displeased grunt, a shifting of fabric. There was not much time left, that much was for sure, he could not deal with the other's stubbornness at the moment.

“Wake up, you sluggish mortal!”

Eventually, Tony rolled from his side to his back, looking at Loki with a disgruntled face, not really awake yet. He had to squint his eyes to see right, obviously seeking for Loki's face in the half-darkness around them.

"What? What is it?!

"Get up and get in your suit. They're coming."

Not quite convinced, Tony propped himself onto his elbows, then slapped Loki's hand away with a gentle but determined movement.

"Who?"

"The Chitauri, you imbecile. I could sense it, the entire night. The matter of the universe is shifting - they will be here in minutes."

Loki made a pause, his eyes darting over the dark night sky, then he turned around to Tony with a growing grin, something akin to pride glistening in his eyes.

"They are looking for me."

Judging from the way his eyes widened for a second, Tony was awake now. Loki knew he completely trusted him in detecting Chitauri - he had found their ship once when the inventor had not seen a thing at the horizon and now, his excited demeanor was implication enough.

Loki hurried towards the window, opening the louvered blinds to look outside, but the night sky was clear. No giant Chitauri mothership hovering directly above them, not even some lights in the distance. They would have heard them, anyway, but at the moment, it was completely silent except for the soothing waves and a low breeze of wind.

Still, Loki knew that it could happen any moment, he felt the energy in the air prickling on his
The muscles in his back and neck were taut from anticipation, yet there was nothing but the cry of a lone seagull from outside.

He could feel Tony's gaze, knew that he probably looked ridiculous, standing at the window like an overexcited dog staring at the moving leaves outside, but he did not care.

Eventually, the silence lasted a little bit too long for the human to endure:

"You sure? 'Cause - no offense - you are prone to a lite version of paranoia and perhaps-"

Tony had not even the chance to finish his sentence. From one second to the other, a flash of white covered the entire sky, burning its bright image into Loki's retina and from behind, he could hear Tony utter something vulgar.
The air was filled with the crackling, sizzling sound of something really, really big tearing apart, then the light went out as fast as it had come.

When the white receded, there was a rift in the sky, growing larger and larger like an all consuming hole, greedily eating up the stars around.

As always, Tony should have trusted Loki's detection skills.

Loki heard how the mortal entangled himself from the blanket and got up, hurriedly starting to rummage for a pair of jeans as the world was again drowned in blinding white. Another few curses and the noises of the other struggling with his clothes in the dark, then he appeared at Loki's side at the window, watching in a mixture of horror and an anticipation adjacent to elation as another portal opened not far from the first one.

"Alright, let's give our unexpected guests a warm welcome."

They exchanged a look and from behind, you could hear the buzzing noise of his suit, booting.

Barely the blink of an eye later, Tony was engulfed by the metal, and this time, Loki felt glad about the layers of armor that separated the mortal from the outside world. Of course, the shell was not impenetrable, but Tony would still be safe.
Loki had no time to watch out for anyone. He had a battle to fight.

First flashes of light erupted from the portals, soldiers arriving on their hovercrafts and swarming out over the coast. There was another, bright flash in the atmosphere, then a third portal opened with an infernal crackling noise- Right above the city center, it was gigantic in size, way larger than the other two.

“Holy shit.”, Loki heard Tony contribute his pertinent input, then, their attention was distracted.

There was a rumbling noise, seconds later the door flew open and Rogers dashed inside, already clad in his dark blue uniform and the shield strapped to his arm.

“Good, you are awake!”

The Captain seemed stressed, of course he was: Even Loki had not seen anything like this before, an attack of this scale... Until now, he had not even known that the Chitauri were had found a way to create a portal without the Tesseract, but apparently, they had.
However, this was not the moment to contemplate the how's right now, there would be time for this later.
On the night-sky, hovercrafts left the portal, heading into their direction - first soldiers, coming for
Loki.

“I have to go, I will distract them. They won't be very interested in you, so you have time to get into the city and confront the ones there.”

A slightly irritated expression scurried over Roger's face, and he looked keen to blame Loki – again. For the sake of everyone's well-being, he did not, but just removed himself from the scene, giving Tony and Loki a little bit of space.

The Iron Man's faceplate opened again, and Loki was faced with Tony's concerned expression. They stared at each other for a moment, at a loss of what to say to each other. Then, eventually, Tony uttered:

“Be safe, okay?”

The inventor stepped forward, his metallic hands stroking over Loki's cheeks, surprisingly gentle for such a strong machine. Tony's lips caught his, and although it felt unsatisfying to be kept at distance by a layer of metal, Loki closed his eyes and let the sensation sink in, memorized every part of it.

For all the confidence they both had in their abilities – this was not a plain Chitauri ship alone. They were going to war now, and maybe, this had been the last time they had seen each other.

Feelings rose within him, feelings he wanted to savor, but had to store into a safe part of his mind. He could not let anything distract him now and sentiments, he knew, were deadly if you wanted to win. When they separated again, he could still feel the tingle on his lips, tasting them with the tip of his tongue. Then, with an apologizing look, Loki stepped back and tore his eyes from Tony's face. Determined not to look back again, he opened the window and was outside in a matter of seconds.

The moment his feet touched the ground, it was as if he had landed in another world.

Noises that previously had been subdued were now deafeningly loud, filling the air with all their intensity and made it hard to focus on one thing alone. From the streets he heard the screaming of people, the rushing noise of the hovercrafts, the crackling of the portals above – and in the distance, Loki could see fire. The city had been set aflame, and the fire was eating away at the metallic constructs that were the human's buildings.
Against the bright haze of the fire, huge dark shapes were visible, moving slowly - Leviathans.

The god abandoned the sight for another - he had to focus. The city was not his concern, at least not now. He could only hope that the mortals were able to gather enough forces to fight back against the approaching hordes of aliens.

A vanguard of six hovercrafts had spotted him and came rushing in his direction. He did not know whether they were out to make him a prisoner – at least until he gave up the Tesseract, which would never happen – or if they were only out for a kill. If he was honest, it did not matter.

They would die, one way or the other.

Loki leaped forward, away from the house and towards the enemies, bypassing fences, gardens and streets, until his feet had carried him onto the shore of the ocean. No one was around here, which meant he did not have to worry about anything or anyone getting hurt. Not that he cared much about the loss of a mortal life, but in the peculiar position he was in right now, he could not allow himself to cause any causalities.
With the ease that came with ongoing practice, the god called for the Tesseract's energy stored deep within him, allowing it to engulf him with its power. Like a smoldering fire, the blue spread from the tip of his fingers up his hands and lower arms.

And there it was: the characteristic pain, familiar now, but each time hitting him with a new intensity. At first, the stinging and burning was barely bearable, making his whole body shudder in ache, but then, it suddenly vanished completely.

How ironic - the only time he could not feel the agony the Tesseract caused him was during the use of her magic which was the catalyst for even more damage done to him. It was not that he had anything like a choice now.

It just needed the hint of an idea to set the air in front of the Chitauri on fire and only one of the hovercrafts was able to avoid a collision. The other five flew directly into the flames and fell to the ground in steaming heaps of metal and screaming, scorched meat.

The god did not bother to put the burning Chitauri out of their misery - they had no chance with the blue fire eating away at them. They were too many of them to make sure that everyone had been killed... he needed a more efficient way of decimating them, that much was obvious.

Dozens upon dozens of Chitauri were pouring out of the closest portal now, and they were all coming for him, like a swarm of insects out for a meal.

They had no idea that they were signing their own death sentence with that strategy. Probably, the idea behind was to overwhelm him by sheer numbers, assuming his reserves would eventually drain before he could kill them all.

What they seemed to fail to see was that they made just the right target for him - it would take nothing but one well-coordinated spell to take out the entire squadron.

The energy for such a powerful spell was there, but Loki hesitated. He could only vaguely estimate what consequences were in for him if he did this, even more so if he attempted a magic-consuming spell like the one he had in mind. But did he have another choice?

No, definitely not.

There was no time for long contemplation – it was only a matter of seconds until the first Chitauri could reach him, and then, it would be too late.

Magic energy flowed through his entire being, left his body through the tip of his fingers, formed itself in the air in front of him. The energy twisted, coiled in his grasp, invisible for anyone but him, and eventually complied and focused itself onto the desired aim.

Taking a deep breath, Loki dared to unleash it.

A flash of white-blue light, the infernal noise of an out-of-control explosion tore apart the air. Loki was catapulted backwards by his own spell, tumbled over the ground in whirled up sand and dust, trying to get back onto his feed at the same time – there was still the chance that some Chitauri had survived and he did not want to be on the ground when they came.

Yet, when Loki had finally steadied himself and rose his head to look up at the sky, there was nothing but the blueish afterglow of his magic. Parts of hovercrafts, burning and malformed, as well as something that could at some point have belonged to a living alien, rained down onto the coast and he had to take a step to the side not to be hit, but most of it ended up in the ocean beneath.
Without the Tesseract's power, a raw spell like this would have cost him almost all of his reserves, but right now, he felt barely stimulated. Loki knew that this was only a temporary state, a cruel make-believe, and the moment the Tesseract's magic would recede, it would leave nothing behind but wounds and pain. Only then he would know how great the damage was this time.

At least, he had gambled right.

Only in the distance, he saw a few remaining hovercrafts, yet they did not dare to approach him another time. Even if it meant rejecting their commands, they were not stupid enough to fly into their death after what they had just seen. Instead, their directions changed – they were flying over to the burning city.

Loki knew what that meant. Again, the narrow streets between high skyscrapers of concrete, steel and glass were meant to be the battlefield – only that this time, he would fight at the other side. And he would be victorious.

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Tony's gaze lingered a second longer on the place where Loki had just been standing, then he let his face-plate close and turned around to leave. Just when he left the house, he heard roaring sound of the Quinjet's starting engines penetrate the noise of battle. The heavy machine was already ascending from the backyard, slowly lifting itself over the house until he could see it. It had its loading ramp still open, revealing Captain America standing inside, somewhere further behind probably Bruce. Thor was nowhere to be seen, but Tony was sure that he would not let himself miss a fight like this. He would probably be the first to arrive beneath that giant portal, his hammer already having smashed dozens of Chitauri skulls when the others would finally follow.

"See you on the battlefield!"

Steve's shout barely made it through the terrible noise all around them, but Tony heard him nonetheless. Then, the loading ramp eventually closed and the Quinjet gained speed, attempting to leave him behind. As if he would let himself be overtook by this ancient piece of scrap iron. Finally, he activated his thrusters and rushed from the ground, catching up with the jet in a few seconds.

"With that snail's pace you've going on there, you can clean up the corpses after I'm done.", he announced in the micro inside of his helmet after Jarvis had conveniently found out the frequency of the Quinjet's speakers.

With that, he doubled his pace and passed the older vehicle, leaving behind a faint trail of brightly gleaming smoke.

It might be a change in relations he had not expected, but somehow, he would soon be fighting on the side of those who had been sent to kill him only weeks ago. Whatever strange taste it left in his mouth when he thought about it, he knew that it was the best solution they could think of. If they would be successful - and fucking hell, they would! - it would proof that Loki was trustworthy. To him, it would proof that the others were still intelligent enough to realize a once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity.

However, there was not the time for great analysis of their current situation when he dared to have a look around.
From up here, the sheer extent of the attack became visible and it was worse than Tony had ever imagined. He had fought those aliens before and he knew they were not invincible, but this time, they came in masses and they came fast. There were four portals yet, three smaller once and a big one, its outlines as large as the inner city district of L.A., the Chitauri swarming out of them like a plague of fleas infesting an already weakened animal. What had caused horrified awe within him a year ago, now was only a minor part of their army: Leviathans, already 6 in number, were being ridden into battle, but there was more, way more, when he looked down in the streets. It was like the aliens had released an entire zoo down there - ugly looking beasts roamed the street, not identifiable as any mammal he knew of, with more limbs than necessary and screams that were even worse than those of the fleeing population.

There were already houses burning, a lot of them, cars bursting up in explosions, bringing both people and Chitauri to death. From afar, he saw the first military helicopters arrive and from what his screens told him, there were already ground forces preparing to join the fight. Hundreds would be dead when they would arrive, unable to stand up to the extraterrestrial force levels.

It had only been 10 minutes since the first portal had opened and the city was already on fire.

Tony did not want to think about the city's inhabitants, being torn from sleep just to know that they too were about to face the horrors they had seen on TV. He refused to think of anything else which was not strictly strategical. Attacks of this extent happening in large cities always ended in catastrophes – the last time he had fought like this, the catastrophe had almost ended his life.

No, neither would he think of New York now, nor of Loki. He was sure the god would get along just fine.

The closer he came to the epicenter of this disaster, the harder it became to simply watch. Hovercrafts were approaching from all sides, taken down by well-aimed repulsor blasts when he had the time to. He was trying to save ammunition for now - this battle would not be over too soon. Evading energy rays from down on the ground or the sides, he made his way closer to his first chosen aim - one of the leviathans. It was like an ant colony, numerous of moving targets, but it were those giant-turtle-monsters which did the highest amount of damage.

"Don't you too love some good old-fashioned pre-post-comparison, Jarvis?", Tony asked his A.I., more speaking to himself, though, as he tried to locate the best point to attack while he flew side to side with the beast.

"I am still not certain that only one blast will be able to do lethal damage."

Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on your standpoint - the engineer did not get the time to convince him. Out of nowhere, something heavy fell from the sky, landing right on the beasts neck. Its impact was so hard that the leviathans flight path made a serious downwards curve and only when there was suddenly lightning building in the sky, Tony knew who it was. Empowered by the force of thunder, Thor brought Mjölnir down on the leviathan's skull with one mighty swing. The beast uttered a pained numb screech, then its movements became disoriented as it descended unerringly further down towards the ground.

The Chitauri riding it either fled their sinking ship or went for Thor, but Tony would have none of that. He was on the broad back of the beast the next moment, pulverizing the idiotic alien who attempted to attack the thunderer from behind with an energy blast, then shoved a next one down to be crushed to pieces on the asphalt beneath. Seconds later, the characteristic sound of the god's hammer was buzzing through the air again as he
joined Tony to fight at his side, the floor beneath them coming closer and closer the farther the
dead leviathan was falling down.

Only when its fins were tearing apart the building's walls at their sides, Tony decided this became
too unpleasant to stay longer and rushed forward and away from the impending impact. Thor got
down with the beast all the way and Tony landed to wait for him. He had no time to look at the
crash though, once arrived on the ground, as suddenly something manifested from the shadows of
an ally on his side.

“What the-”

Running like it had rabies, a giant predator leaped forward to jump at him and he had barely
enough time to raise his arm in defense, then he was on the ground already and a big set of teeth
snapped shut right in front of his face. Some hundred feet further down the road, the leviathan crashed onto the asphalt street with its weight, crushing everything which came into its path, but Tony had no time to mind.
He clenched his teeth, the weight of the animal heavily pressing down on him, its claws trying to
tear of the metallic places on his chest. The sharp fangs sullied with blood, the inappropriate
number of eyes, the wild noises it made all seemed to come directly from a horror movie.

Tony had never been frightened by horror movies. Holding it at arm's length just long enough to channel his energy, he released a uni-beam and where had been the strong ribcage of an alien monster before, now was a perforated hole and a sprinkly cloud of blood and innards.

What was left of the beast fell to the ground motionlessly and Tony got up as quickly as possible,
unimpressed by the smeared blood all over his suit. He was ready to face another assault, ready to fire at the first moving thing. This was different than their fights before. They were so many now, way more than before, and they had ramped up their armies. Since he had entered the airspace above L.A., he had barely had the time to take a breath.

Maybe Loki and he had improved and gained powers - but so had their enemy.

Looking around now, the street was almost calm, except for a movement behind him. From the
huge cloud of dust and asphalt, he could make out the silhouette of Thor coming towards him. His
face was grim, but seemingly, the rage of battle did wonders to his stiff leg, since his limping was
almost gone. A grin flashed over Tony's face as he was joined by the other, letting down his
defense again for a moment.

"I don't like being upstaged.", he greeted the god, making a vague gesture towards the giant heap of
dead leviathan down the street.

"You were so slow, I thought I would get started without you, Man of Iron."

It was refreshing to hear Thor deferring to his remarks, because he was the person he was not
allowed to blow it with. He was Loki's brother and they had set their difficulties apart, seemingly -
they had not talked, since, but Tony was not sure how much the god was convinced of what he and
Loki had been doing. Better be nice.

"Look who's here."

Obviously having tracked their position, the Quinjet had arrived above them, slowly descending to
the empty spot behind them until it hit ground. It was neither a save place to land it nor the best
idea to land it at all, since its weaponry was quite effective, yet its landing meant another thing:
they were all here now. All, but Loki.

Once the loading ramp was opened, Steve jumped out of the jet first, followed by a Bruce Banner looking mildly inconvenient and still far from hulking out (but you could never see that in advance, anyway) and then, Clint and Natasha, both in full battle clothing, the bow already in Clint's hand. They looked all pretty impressive - if you mentally subtracted Bruce - moving as a unit of well-trained soldiers and fighters, ready for battle.

The street was strangely empty now, as if the whole Chitauri army had collectively decided to leave out this exact spot of L.A. in favor of the others. Far above their heads, a squadron of hovercrafts flew over the sky and marginally, Tony noticed that it started to dawn.

Steve reached them first, but his glance was distracted by the other side of the road every few seconds, as if he was expecting something. On the screens of his HUD, Tony could not make out anything which would explain his nervousness and still - he felt that there was something to be nervous about. After all the fast, breath-taking combats, the crossfires he had to fly through to get in here, this felt like the eye of the cyclone. Not even one of their mindless animals crossed the street any longer.

"Guys, we are having a problem and we don't have much time to solve it."

This directed the inventor's attention back to Steve and for a second, he was angry with himself that he was awaiting his orders like he had always did when they had fought in a team - a behavioral pattern that, once internalized, was hard to unlearn.

"Your motivational speeches have lost a bit of their edge.", he remarked instead, but the Captain seemed not in the mood to let himself be teased.

Invisible to the others behind his face-plate, Tony frowned, wondering what other problem they could have except for the sheer endless Chitauri masses ravaging the city or the portals of which they had no clue how to close them again.

"There is a battalion of Chitauri soldiers marching towards us in this very second, about 500 of them. I don't know what, but something is different about them."

"I fired all that the old lady had to fire, but it would not as much as scratch them.", Clint added, "They were protected by something invisible, like a shield. We did not get through it. That's why we landed at all."

A whole battalion of foot-soldiers? His sensors must have noticed them, if that was true, but there was nothing in close proximity resembling such a huge group. Come to think of it, though, it was obvious why: if they were using some kind of magic alien trickery, they would be able to cloak themselves from human technology. Smart bastards.

"It sounds like a magical trick, although the Chitauri are not great masters in magic. There will be someone or something emitting that shield - if we destroy that, even 500 of those beasts are no match for us."

Thor said with determination, his gaze already fixed to the end of the street, as if he could already see them.

Tony followed the direction of his look, waiting.

At first, he did not see anything, meanwhile listening with only one ear to whatever techniques Natasha was proposing. Then, there was a faint movement in the distance. From the twilight of the
street, between left behind cars and wrecks of crashed hovercrafts, a dark line of figures was forming. They were marching with great discipline and even greater silence, only the rhythmic sounds of their steady steps telling from their arrival. Yet, Chitauri ground troops were nothing he feared - something else made a shiver run down his spine.

They were lead by one figure, taller than all of them. It was clad with a dark cloak, and the closer it came the more obvious it became that this was not an ordinary alien. This was something else entirely.

“They are here.”

Thor's voice was stern, but composed and made all conversation stop immediately. Three steps, then Steve had pushed himself to the forefront of their little group, his shield raised and his stance speaking of resoluteness.

“Avengers Assemble!”

Somehow, from one second to the other, these words did the thing.

Gathered behind and around Steve, they were, at least for now, a team again. A team, those alien soldiers had to reckon with and which would stand side by side to ward the world from threats it could not deal with alone. Whatever their backstory and whatever the numerous little sad stories interwoven in it – in the coming fight, they would be just a team of remarkable people again.

All in positions of readiness, they waited, but the the Chitauri were not attacking. The anticipation made Tony's throat tighten and he had to swallow as he watched the street fill more and more with a almost never-ending mass of heavily armed foot-soldiers.

No one made the first step: If they did not show the usual behavior, the Avengers would not do as well. Whatever they were planning to do, it was more complex than a simple attack. Their leader - when he was close enough, Tony found that he successfully renewed the definition of 'ugly as fuck' - was walking with the haughty pace only persons with great power displayed, or those who thought of themselves to wield said powers. If he should make a guess, it would be him he would suggest as the source of their strange protecting shield. Loki would know for certain, though - he was the magic expert.

Speaking of which - where the hell was he?

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“What do they want?”, Clint uttered beside Steve, the bow loosely in his hand giving the false impression that he would need more than a second to fire it.

As they came closer, the possible turns this moment could take reduced to two: Either, this was a strange, well-planned ambush or they were out for a talk.

Well, probably not a talk. Negotiations, threats, a demand for unresisting capitulation more likely – all that what the enemy usually said in the moments he thought his glory to be the greatest, before he was eventually killed. Neither of those options was in question for Steve. Still, he broke away from his own group and approached the army in front of them with a few steps indicating that he was open for an exchange of words, but that he would not, in any way, be accommodating.
Eventually, the two leaders met in the middle, maybe seventy feet left between them.

“Is that everything Midgard has to offer? Their only protectors?”

The creature's voice was a deep, raspy sound, and while he spoke, his mouth began to color with the bright red of blood. Apparently, the beast’s own teeth were slicing its lips while talking – what an abomination.

“There are much more than the six of us, but we are the ones that speak for all of them. What do you want?”

The creature snickered, and took a step forward. Steve could feel how the air shifted and little specks of dust were whirled up when the magic shield apparently expanded around the Chitauri-army. Steve still had no clue how to break this thing, but he hoped he could distract the leader long enough for Tony or Thor to discover some way to break it.

“What we want is simple, or furthermore, what our master wants. He wants you petty little mortals wiped from the face of earth, and my Chitauri want your planet, and the dead bodies of you who call yourself their heroes. There is no more room for humanity, even less for a band for pathetic heroes that already failed before. You won't last longer than the blink of an eye.”

Behind himself, Steve could hear the shuffling of bodies. The alien's announcement had been pretty clear that there would be no way around a battle. That there was no room for mercy.

“Stop talking Steve, this won't help.”, the soldier heard Barton from behind, but he waved the archer off with an almost angry gesture of his arm. He needed some more time to think up a fitting strategy, because as it looked right now, there was no way they could break the magic barrier just like that.

“The death on your side will be devastating. Humanity does not give up just like that – there will be not many Chitauri left to inhabit the planet once you have vandalized it completely. Millions of Chitauri have died throughout this war, and there will die even more. Is it really worth so much suffering?”

Empty talk, nothing else, but the longer he could keep the battle from beginning, the better. The soldier felt urged to take a look back at Tony, to ask him 'Have you got anything yet?', but the raspy laughing from the Chitauri-leader interrupted this train of thoughts.

“Human notions, so pathetic. My Chitauri are a never-ending source of soldiers, and you have no chance of even decimating a tiny part of it. And once we have your planet, we will thrive even more. So spare yourself the pain and lay down the weapons. It will be over soo-”

Suddenly, the beast’s head jerked around, and a growl escaped between it’s blood-sullied teeth. He sniffed, staring at a dark spot in the shadow of an building slightly behind the group of Avengers.

Was it staring at all? Steve could not see where it had its eyes.

Then he too turned around to stare at whatever it was that had distracted the alien. Somewhere in the dark, he could make out a figure, emitting a strange blue glow.

The soldier knew that it could be only one person. Never before, he had actually felt relieved to see Loki, to exhale when he saw that otherworldly glow emitting from him form.

He did not know where the god had come from – probably traveled here by magic – but it did not matter. Right now, Loki was exactly what they needed. If someone could break the magic shield around the Chitauri-army, it was the trickster god.
With measured steps, Loki emerged from out of the darkness and into the faint reddish light that announced the beginning of the day. His arms, quietly burning in a cold blue, made a stark contrast to the light of dawn.

“Crawled out of your hole, I see. Does Thanos think it is time for you to drag that limp sack of meat that you call your body onto the battlefield, to finally be of some use?”

“Watch your words, Asgardian. There is still a promise that has to be kept. You will be begging for death when I'm done with you.”

“It is quite flattering that you still make yourself the effort to keep to your promises, but I think I'll have to decline. You haven't been able to get a grasp on me two times, and you would not be pleased if you made third attempt now.”

“Don't pretend to be more than you are. I saw you, little godling, a weak and defenseless thing that my Chitauri found - defeated by the darkness of the void and your own, pathetic mind. The only worth you still hold is the Tesseract that you have hidden away, and once we've killed everyone in this city and saturated our troops on mortal flesh, you will be taken back to him, and he will-”

The creature's words were suddenly cut off, and it just stood there, mouth slightly opened and unmoving. Before Steve could wonder what was happening and what had made the alien stop, a low gurgling sound came from its throat. Faster than anybody could comprehend the situation, the gurgling swelled to a pained, retching noise and the alien's mouth opened wide, body shivering and paralyzed.

Then, with a flash of blue light from the inside of it, the head exploded.

Pieces of flesh were flying into all directions, pinkish brain and red blood, splattered all over the walls and the asphalt beneath. The Chitauri in proximity screeched and scrambled out of the way almost hysterically, apparently not wanting to get in touch with the remains of their leader. The headless body stood for a few more seconds, then it dropped to the ground, boneless and bleeding onto the asphalt beneath.

“Your words are a waste of air.”, Loki said with a nonchalant expression on his face and wiped of a piece of mushed flesh that had been plastered onto his cheek.

“Yet, fortunately, you nonsense talk gave me enough time to rebut that shield of yours.”

A malicious grin spread over the god's features, and with a wipe of his hand, the air was filled with the noise of shattering glass. The air around the Chitauri lit up in a bright white, then the shield broke away into millions upon millions of little shards, raining down onto the screaming Chitauri. That elite troop, full of discipline before, broke apart in a mess of scrambling bodies. Yet, despite the chaos, no one of them dared to step into the proximity of the decapitated corpse.

Steve could only watch in awe for a second, shield risen to parry any incoming attacks, but there came none. Without his need to say anything at all, the two Asgardians performed quickly and efficiently.

“Thor, now!”

The Thundergod reacted so fast to Loki's command that Steve wondered how many times they had fought together like this before. Nothing more than a blur of silver and red when he lifted from the ground, Thor soon filled the air with the static sizzle of lightning. One second later, and the street was illuminated by the bright,
jerking light of the thunderer's attack and a more than a hundred of Chitauri screaming as they were scorched in a thunderstorm.

Tony did not wait for the last of Thor's lightnings to discharge into the ground before he was in the air again.

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Without informing the other's, he was in the air again, ready to strike. When Loki had disabled their magical barrier, an ocean of red hostile dots had appeared on his screens. One lightning, however powerful, was not enough for those. They were everywhere, in the byroads and the allies, and now that their leader was dead and their formations broke, they simply started to run amok.

Just behind his field of vision, a detonation made the ground shatter and the air vibrate when one of Clint's arrows exploded right in one of the alien's faces, but Tony was on his way further down the road.

Flying a neatly straight line right over the median strip - invisible under Chitauri bodies and armory - he dropped a small mine every few feet. The small, inconspicuous black devices never touched the ground, but burst open into 10 smaller mines to rain down on the masses like a wildfire. He was too high up to feel the blast waves, but when he heard the screeching and the howling beneath him, he had to grin.

A sudden roar tore through their screams, different from the Chitauri's, but definitely not human.

The Hulk had been released from his human form, doing what he could do best. Like a force of nature, the giant green monster rampaged through the way smaller aliens, making his way through them without even halting once. Bodies flew to the sides when he simply grabbed them at a limb to hurl them away, like they were nothing but lifeless puppets. Chitauri bodies crashed against house facades, others uselessly trying to stick their spears through the thick skin on his back - even if they drew blood, it did not stop the Hulk. It only made him angrier.

The last thing Tony saw from him before he minded his own business again was how he lifted one of their elite soldiers from the ground with his bulky hand wrapped around its head, the body struggling in the air without effect - he might had been drunk as hell, but he certainly remembered those bastards to be stronger when they had appeared in his living room months prior - and then just crushed head and helmet with his fist.

Flying by a house's glass wall, he glanced to the side as a movement grabbed his attention. The inventor almost had a heart-attack, when he was suddenly face to face with a young child, its nose pressed against the window to have a better look.

"Shit!", he muttered, then halted in the air again to look around. Yes, the girl was not the only one - there were still civilians here, lots of them. Their faces hidden behind curtains and reflecting windows, they watched the battle, expressions horrified.

It was barely 7 in the morning, they had all been sleeping when the attack had started. Now, they were trapped in their houses, caught between running away and risking to lose their lives in the turmoils of battle or staying in their flats - risking their life while waiting for the battle to come to them.

The army was not here yet, nobody was here but them. In the distance, you could hear the shots of tanks and the piping noise of jet aircrafts rushing past, but those were in the sky and did not help the people on the ground.

He cursed to himself again - he was not here for evacuation, he was here to blow up Chitauri asses.
"Steve. Steve!"

It did not matter to him this moment that he almost yelled in his speakerphone. Those people needed to be safe - now. There would be no after-party for him if by killing hundreds of those alien fuckers, the double amount of civilians would die. No, he could no think about that now. Innocent people were in there. Mothers were in there, mothers and children.

"Steve!!", now he was yelling, “The houses are FULL of people! Do something about it! I will take care of-"

Just in this second, when he had been distracted by a glimpse of his own haunting past, something purplish hit him. He whirled around in the air and crashed against a fire escape stairs, then suddenly, a strong grip around his ankle tore him to the ground.

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“What? Tony?”

Steve pressed the hand against the small device in his ear, but the the intercom did not give him an answer. Yet, he had understood and when he looked around, he knew that the other had been right. Damn, he needed to do something!

He too had noticed the civilians around – most of them in form of corpses on the street, shot down by Chitauri-weapons or crushed by thrown-over cars. It would end in a disaster if those people did not get out of the buildings. One Leviathan was enough to tear down an entire skyscraper, and if that happened, thousands would die. Where was the army? They should have been here minutes ago. If someone could help with the evacuation - to lead the civilians to a secured street, on into a subway and then out of the battle zone – it was them. Steve surely could not handle thousands of people all on his own.

With a well-aimed move, he hurled his shield towards three incoming Chitauri, hitting the three heads of them in a row before it returned to his hand – just in time to block an attack from a small, six-legged beast of them which he had never seen before. As well as possible, he retreated into a more quiet corner, his concerned gaze roaming over the windows above.

“Has anyone seen policemen, or soldiers? We need someone to start an evacuation!”, he called into the intercom, audible for every team-member.

“Nope, I'm a little bit busy here!”, he could hear Clint, the sound of alien screeches and explosions in the background.

There was no answer from either Thor, Tony or the Hulk, but Natasha eventually responded:

“I've seen a few tanks, but no foot-soldiers. They probably know that they would be slaughtered bef-”

Natasha got interrupted by the infernal noise of an explosion – Steve could hear it in the intercom, as well as an echo resonating through the streets.

“Natasha! Is everything alright?! What happened?”

Rustling at the other end of the line, then Natasha's exhausted breathing.
“It's... it's alright, it was just Loki. He took down a Leviathan.”

Steve sighed in relief, but then was drawn into a fight again. One of the larger Chitauri soldiers, his superior armor giving away his echelon, fired at him with what could only be described as a small grenade launcher. Before he could hear Natash's answer, a spirited jump saved him from being blown to pieces by a blue energy explosion. The next blast was reflected by his shield, milling an uneven line in a housewall at their side before it killed the alien that had fired it.

“He's fighting pretty good. He kills even faster than Thor or the Hulk.”

It was still Natasha speaking in his ear and Steve found the time to step onto the larger street again, finally able to answer.

“I can imagine that quite well-”, he only had to think of the mad look he had seen in Loki's eyes,”-...if you see someone who might be able to lead the evacuation, instruct them. Otherwise, keep the Chitauri from entering the buildings, if you got the chance.”

The assassination only confirmed his command, then the intercom was cut. Having a talk mid-battle surely was not that easy.

The street Steve was in now was entirely deserted, only a few Chitauri corpses lying around, and some huge animal that looked even more deadly than any of the common soldiers. What was left of the 500 aliens coming to end their existence had scattered in all four winds, to be defeated somewhere else. Sounds of the battle were echoing through the city, and it reminded Steve only too much of the battles he had fought in New York. He had to join the active fight again - or he could use the opportunity to begin the evacuation. At the end of the street, he had spotted a subway-station, bringing the people in there would at least get them out of the direct line of fire. If they would not end up panicking and trampling each other to death...

Before Steve had a chance to continue this train of thoughts, a roar cut through the air. The sound was infernal, loud enough to cause violent vibrations in the glass of the skyscrapers. The supersoldier only pressed his hands to his ears, silently cursing whatever new abomination they would be face with, now. The sound had not come from the Hulk, neither from one of the Leviathans... This one had to be something bigger.

His rose his head, eyes searching the sky, fixing at the gigantic portal above – and his heart skipped a beat.

Something was uncoiling from the depth of space, something gigantic. He had learned to trust his eyes in times like this, were aliens and gods shared the space with humans, but still, he had problems accepting what he saw now. An indistinguishable mass of metal plates at first, it emerged from the portal, then the enormous body stretched and bend and Steve could finally make out what it was.

A gigantic serpent, its length several times those of one Leviathan, and apparently made of nothing else than the strange alien metal. It was blind, no eyes visible at its head as the thick plating was draped all over it. The most prominent feature of its face were the huge gray teeth, sticking out of its long muzzle, big enough to swallow an entire bus with one bite.

It was an apocalyptic sight worse than what his childhood-self had imagined the apocalypse to be
like. The sheer size of it, larger than any living being he had ever witnessed, was worse than anything the flashy action movies from today could depict as the arrival of the world's end.

An ear-shredding roar left its muzzle again, and this time, it was joined by the triumphant howls of thousands of Chitauri.

The beast was diving down right at the city, contact inevitable. Steve could only watch as it came closer, casting an enormous shadow over the street. A smallish feeling of utter helplessness befell him when he watched from the ground how its metal plating glittered in the yellow light of the beginning day.

But then, right before the creature made contact with the first houses, something hit its head, and a loud howl escaped from between its giant jaws.

“Do not fret! I will take care of the Sky-Serpent!”

Thor's voice sounded through the intercom, breathy and sounding completely concentrated, then one could hear anew the sound of Mjolnir hitting the serpents' head. Maybe, they were not so helpless at all.

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Tony made a rude landing on the ground, the metal of his suit sending out sparks at the unwanted contact with the hard asphalt. His head was swimming from the fast motion, and reflexively, he tried to get on all fours again, still not knowing what had hit him and where it was now. Yet, he had no time to get up, as suddenly, he was hit by an a massive explosion of a dark, purplish blue which sent him flying again.

Burning, painful heat flared up on his whole back area, then he crashed into the floor a second time. Everything was indistinct and shaky again and he felt his breath being knocked out of his lungs, then he came to a stop and could breath again. He screwed up his eyes, trying to regain control and fight down the pain. Only barely he evaded another blast of pure heat, rolling around and then rushing forward on the floor in an uncoordinated leap. What the hell was this?

"Sir, it appears that the energy level of the weapon's beams is superior to the suit's heat insulation. I'd rather suggest you not let yourself be hit again."

Half of Jarvis well-meant advice was drowned in the noise of a wall busting apart - the wall where Tony had sought shelter behind. A huge, steaming hole had been torn in it and through it, he looked directly into the blindingly bright barrel of a humongous, double-barreled energy rifle. Before he could even lose a word about what had to be (or, rather, not to be) between its owners legs for him feeling the need to compensate like that, he had to evade getting killed by it again.

This time, he was faster, though.

A lunge to the side, then he used the recharge time for his advantage.

Hit by a repulsor blast, the beasts hand exploded in a squish of an unidentifiable color and the weapon landed on the ground. The engineer skipped any calculations whether he would probably kick the bucket as well if he did what he intended to, and simply fired another time. The next repulsor blast came within a second after his first and the weapon on the ground burst into a huge ball of purple light.

Both the inventor and the beast wielding it were carried from their feet by the explosion's intensity. A strange, howling sound came from the alien's side and the shockwave pressed Tony against the closest wall, a sharp pain tearing on his scorched flesh. Yet, he grit his teeth together and got into
position again, ready to blow that guy's nose off as soon as the dust thinned out.

What was revealed behind the dust, though, eclipsed every notion of attack for a first moment.

The Chitauri - if you could call it this name, still - was huge. More a giant than a man, it overpowered Tony by almost half of his own height and even though the right half of his body was steaming, his flesh burned and the arm that had been holding the weapon nothing but a black stump, it did not seem to bother him that much.

Well, easy for somebody who had - believe it or not – still 5 arms left.

They really had cast the ugliest critters they had found – and he had not even took his face in consideration as well. Small eyes, standing wide apart on both sides of his head – almost insect like in appearance - and a set of crooked teeth pointing out of his mouth, it looked almost too dull to be even able to handle a gun like that.

“Wow, your face certainly adds nicely to the bully-boy-tactics.”

The creature bared its teeth in a belligerent impulse, then four of his arms reached around its back to conjure up two sharp-looking, weirdly ornamented knives, as long as Tony's entire arm, and two guns, smaller than the first and with a blueish glow.

Their beginning conversation was drowned by an infernal noise from above and he only heard something like 'Sky-Serpent' through his intercom, but he quickly shut it down before he could be distracted by the horrors space had still to offer.
This one here was horror enough.

“The insults of a human, whatever the armor he wears, are not more than the foreplay to the music that will leave his mouth once I break that armor and pull out your intestines to adorn my blades with them.”

The beast's voice was raucous and somehow hissy and made Tony want to clear his own throat and at first, he had problems understanding him. His accent was impossible to integrate with anything he had ever heard on earth before, but when he eventually understood, he grimaced at that unnecessary use of so drastic images of violence.
Then, the genius made an appreciative whistle and slowly nodded, taking up his repulsors again to let their light flare up.

This one would be fun.

“Didn't know they teach their tamed beasts of prey English up there.”

“Watch your words when you speak to a captain, little human.”

Tony did not allow another second to elapse. His shot was evaded by the alien captain with one unexpectedly agile sidestep, hitting the wall behind him to blow it to pieces.
Another step, then the beast was in reach, the buzzing of his weapons warning him of the impending energy blasts. Activating his thrusters, Tony closed the last distance between him and the giant, directly flying into its firing line.

More out of sheer luck than actual skill, he had waited for the exact right moment when both of the Chitauri’s wrists were close enough to grab them with his hands, then he let go of the energy stored within his palms. Bursting through skin, flesh and bone, the Tesseract's energy milled through the beast's fat wrists and left another two stumps.
Knocked off course, the two fired shots whooshed past Tony's head, left and right, in a blinding
light, and its pained roar grated on his ears.

His energy weapons clattered to the ground as he had been robbed of another two hands and the stench of burned flesh and Chitauri blood filled the air.

Just when the inventor wanted to congratulate himself, the giant's backwards stumbling abruptly ended and his focus was back on attacking, pushing forward with sudden force. Tony's eyes widened in surprise as he felt himself being manhandled, still mid-air. It all happened way too fast, illogical for such a heavy colossus to move like that.

“Jarvis, the grenades, now. NOW!”

His yell echoed in his own ears, and the small grenade launchers on his shoulders started to boot, but he was not fast enough. By the brute force of a provoked playground bully, Tony was pressed against what was left of the wall, dangling a few feet above the ground.

Just when the question rushed through his mind what knife the other had to have abandoned to grab him like this, the second knife dived beneath the suit's metallic plate shielding his lower abdomen and sunk deep inside his skin.

A rattling gasp escaped his mouth as hot, piercing pain spread from the entry wound and surged through his entire being.

His gaze, hidden beneath his face-plate, was still cast on the beast's face beneath him, still waiting for the endlessly long 4.2 seconds before the grenades launched. For a moment, he could make out the beginning of a triumphant grin on the alien captain's revolting mouth, then the grenades fired.

The eruption blasted himself through the stone wall behind him inside the building and he crashed there in a rain of dust and debris, reflexively shielding his face with his arms.

Despite the pain threatening to take over his conscious thinking, he knew that there was the possibility that the other was not dead yet. He struggled to come to his feet again as quickly as possible, clenching his teeth. Every stretching and bending of his body hurt and he did not dare to ask Jarvis what exactly the blade had hit.

Yet, when he cast his eyes over the mess the explosion had left, there was not much reminding of the giant.

Slimy pieces of skin and flesh plastered the entire back alley, slowly being covered by a thin layer of gray dust and black ash. The splattered blood gave him a bit of satisfaction and he uttered a complacent little curse. That fucker could drape his own intestines around his sword now.

Tony could not stay here long, though.

This was not a victory - this was at the dangerous border between being slightly embarrassing and almost deadly. He dared to take a look down his own body, still swaying a bit in his movements.

The point of entry was barely visible, only a thin trickle of blood emerging from the line where two metal plates lied on top of each other hinted at the wound. Now, the inferior materials he had been forced to use for the Mark Omega showed their weaknesses.

“Son of a bitch.”, he cursed, addressing no one in particular, then he stumbled towards the hole in the wall to leave the empty entrance hall he had so unconventionally entered.

He had to find Loki.

“Anybody out there knowing where Loki is prowling?”
The intercom only buzzed enigmatically, not giving him any clear answer from anybody. He stepped past debris parts and knocked over pot plants, then he was outside again. Leaving the site of explosion behind, he walked closer towards where the narrow ally opened to a greater street again.

“C’mon, nobody seen our apprentice?”, he muttered, growing not only impatient, but a little panicked.

A sudden flash of pain made him stop mid-movement. He scrunched up his face and pressed his hand against where he felt the wound to be, inhaling and exhaling deeply before he moved on. He had to find Loki, he would heal it in a matter of seconds. The fight was still not over, they had not won. There was no way he could take a time-out now and kick back in a hospital, he-

As his first foot stepped onto the open street, three Chitauri hovercrafts rushed by in front of him. He yanked up his arms to fire if necessary, but the vehicles were already far out of reach, becoming smaller and smaller the closer they came to the sky. Tony quickly pressed his hand against his body again, but then halted and squinted his eyes.

It was almost bright day by now, and even though they were too high to make out any details now, he could still see that the hovercrafts were heavily overloaded. At least 4 to 5 Chitauri squeezed on it, slowing it down drastically. He could not think of an explanation for this oddity, since one of the flying vehicles was shot out of the air the next second, taking one with it and causing the other to lose a good deal of altitude.

When he looked around again, the street was empty. Not only of Chitauri (living Chitauri, to be precise), but of every living creature. No civilians, no strange alien hounds or rhinoceros or whatever. The sky, however, was full of their hovercrafts, but they had lost their monopoly of the L.A. airspace. Jets and drones were almost outnumbering them now, creating a firework against the bright blue winter's sky. From behind, though, it was dark, like storm clouds approaching, throwing a shadow that darkened almost half of Central L.A..

He knew that it was not Thor when finally, the noise of the turbines got through to him, and when he turned his head a bit further, he could see it: The Helicarrer. Mankind was setting up - the Avengers were not the only protagonists on this battlefield any longer.

It took him a few seconds to realize that this was not a personal misperception, but it was obvious: the Chitauri were on the defensive.

They were pulling back.

“Tony? Where are you?! Last time I saw Loki, he was close to the Santa Monica Blvd. They are backing off after Thor has driven the serpent away from the city and over the ocean. One portal has collapsed after they sent a nuke in.”

Steve's voice was hard to understand beneath the crackling of the disturbed line, but the most important information still managed to sink in. The pain forgotten for a second, Tony's mouth twitched into a grin as he made ready to leave the ground again.

“Wow, the guy who came up with that idea should be honored with a badge. I'm on my way. Look for Loki.”
Yeah, finally they are fighting all together!

Chapters will probably come a little bit slower for the next week, since I'm having exams (*crawls into corner and sobs*). I'm doing my best to write in between, since an RP always needs two persons xD

Yes, the Sky-Serpent is supposed to be an analogy to Jormungandr. However, I had to think of THIS the entire time.
(Digimon is awesome :D)
Victory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His hands dived into flesh like it was butter, tearing whole strands of muscle apart and leaving the Chitauri screeching cripples on the ground. Unstoppably, his fire scorched skin wherever he went, bright blue turning into flaring white. Loki left behind a trail of dead and lethally injured aliens, raving through the masses of them – all doomed to die from his merciless hands.

This time, he did not allow himself to be assaulted by anyone or anything: A shield of burning hot air around himself made sure that every being daring to approach him was set aflame. Drawn to him like moths to light, all of them were mutilated by the fire before they even got the chance to hurt him.

For quite some time, he had fought in close proximity to Romanoff, giving the Chitauri attacking them the choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. Yet, as much as she was a not to be underestimated partner in battle, he eventually left her behind. Drawn by the urge to find something more challenging than mere fist fights, he roamed the empty streets in search of something to kill.

Yet, very soon he realized that he had obviously made a name: wherever he went, the crowd of aliens was receding, fleeing when they saw him. It was a pathetic performance, really – they had come to kill him and now, they were running for their worthless lives.

Having a broader look around, Loki found the streets now filled with tanks and soldiers. Jets were rushing past with the speed of lightning, flying in formations to shoot the giant Leviathans out of the sky.
Somewhere at the other end of the city, the Helicarrier had risen above even the highest buildings taking the receding hovercrafts out of the sky with dozens of turrets. Even though Loki knew that in there, the agents of SHIELD were gathered, he did not felt bothered by them any longer.

Upon hearing its roar, Loki turned around again, remembering that somewhere above the ocean, Thor was battling the gigantic Sky-Serpent.
The creature faintly reminded him of his own child, Jormundangr - nevertheless he did not feel any compassion every time the beast yelped in pain when the hammer hit it or when dark clouds gathered above it and lightning struck from the sky.

Loki trusted Thor to know what he was doing. Sooner or later, he would bring the beast down.

Still, although the prospect seemed bright for them, the god could not stop running. Street after street was left behind, but he found them all empty or already filled with the corpses of aliens. In a few corners, mortal soldiers lead citizens to safe areas, but no one took notice of him. Eventually, Loki ended up near a row of highways which collapsed beneath the dead body of a Leviathan. Parts of its burning flesh were scattered all over the street, mixing with huge pieces of debris.
Apart from that, he could see no more aliens.

It really looked like... they had won.

Standing alone in the abandoned part of the city, Loki looked up to the sky, small particles of white
ash blowing in the breeze. There were still the portals above, three of them, after two had been destroyed. He could still feel the rifts in the fabric of the universe, but for now it was safe. Right now, he saw the last Chitauri fleeing, yet only a few of them managed to escape through the last remaining portal before they were shot down.

The air was still filled with the noise of battle, but Loki knew that it would soon be very silent. Only the smell would last a little longer, but eventually, it would be carried away by the wind, too.

Gaze fixed on the billowing portal above, he found his thoughts drifting to the things that lied behind. It was close now, the battle that would decide everything - only a short flight and a brief, interdimensional travel away. But he could not go, not yet, at least.

"Second thoughts?"

Barton's voice made Loki turn around, staring up at the archer who had positioned himself on a nearby roof.

He held the bow in a relaxed grip, had no arrow in hand, but Loki knew that it would be foolish to extrapolate from his relaxed stance to harmlessness. If he wanted to, the other could have fired a bow in a blink of an eye. Of course, Barton was not stupid enough to try anything the like – still, it felt strange to be alone with the archer, the man who despised him so much.

Eventually, the human climbed down from the roof with an almost artistic elegance and approached Loki with a casual expression.

“I have to admit, I'm a little bit surprised you did not turn against us... but as I know you, you probably calculated that the Chitauri would get their asses kicked this time.”

Loki's face was a stern mask, he did not deem that remark worthy an answer. Yet, Barton's sudden chuckle surprised him nonetheless.

“You can't take a joke, huh? I know that you won't leave your sweetheart-”

The archer's expression switched into a strange absence, obviously he was receiving an incoming message through the small intercom in his ear.

“Speaking of the devil... Stark is looking for you.”

Before Loki could contemplate what could mean, a movement in the corner of his eye made him turn around. It was no threat, though, only the green monster that approached the scene, dragging along a dead Chitauri on its ankle, like young kids used to do with old dolls.

Somewhere further behind, the Captain was following. His handsome face looked a little bit more worn than Bartons or the Hulks, yet, he seemed mostly uninjured.

The green beast kept eying Loki warily, his teeth bared in undisguised mistrust. The look in his eyes made it not hard to guess that he probably liked to add him to his collection of limp toys.

Taking a slow, measured step back, the god signaled that he was not out for a fight – not anymore. Fortunately, the creature seemed to accept this temporary peace, although only with an annoyed huff out of his broad nose.

“We made it. We really made it.”

The Captain sounded a little bit out of breath when he spoke, running a hand through his dusty hair while he let his gaze roam around the scenery of broken facades and dead aliens.

“It was surprisingly easy.”, Barton commented. He seemed by far not as relieved as Rogers – he
knew that they were not done yet.

“You were lucky that your forces were in proximity, otherwise this could’ve ended a lot differently. And it is not over yet.”

Again, Loki’s gaze traveled upwards to the portal. Although he had not talked about Thanos directly earlier, he had mentioned his name in his short conversation with the Other. Even though they could not know his name or anything about his existence, by now, they should know that there was something left, something that needed to be killed.

Suddenly filling the air with its vibrations, the noise of the Iron Man suit’s thrusters interrupted his train of thoughts.

A blur of black and blue was all one could make out as the suit rushed around the corner of a skyscraper, barely evading contact, descending with great speed. The trickster frowned, immediately knowing that something was not alright. Usually well-practiced, the process of slowing down before landing was more than a little clumsy this time and, for a second, Loki feared that Tony would simply crash into the ground with full speed. At his side, he saw Barton and Rogers stepping backwards in a subconscious attempt to leave the possible danger zone.

Only in the last second before crashing, Tony breaked heavily. The sudden force of the air hit him like a wall and almost threw him off balance, but he managed. Still, when his boot touched the ground, he lost it, stumbled forward in a hectic struggle not to fall over, before eventually, he lost this struggle.

His knees gave in and met the ground, then his body dropped forward. Visibly exhausted, the mortal used his fist to support himself with one hand, although even that seemed to cost a lot of effort.

Everything suddenly forgotten, Loki hurried over to Tony's side, closely followed by the other Avengers. When he knelt down at the other's side, he did not pay the group any attention anymore. With the suit hiding the body inside from his view, Loki could only guess what the other looked like beneath and his imagination quickly spiraled out of control.

“Tony!”

There was no reaction, Tony kept staring at the ground beneath, ignoring the hand the supersoldier had stretched out to help him up. Eventually, probably with all the strength he could muster, the Iron Man pressed himself up again as casually as possible. Slowly, very slowly, he came to his feet again, Loki rising with him, before the stopped the second they were facing each other.

The god did not even attempt to keep up his well-maintained facade. Loki rarely experienced fear, but in this moment he did, and now knowing what was behind that indifferent metallic face made him go mad.

The other was injured, he knew it. He could smell blood on him, the mortal's own blood, as well as a sourish scent that told him about a possible injury of the intestines. His gaze flickered down for a second, but it took him a moment to discover the wound – nothing but a small cut from the outside with a little bit of blood seeping from it.

Loki knew that the outer smallness of a wound said nothing about how deep such an injury could be. Deep and, on the right spot, potentially lethal.
"What did you do, Tony?"

Tony only huffed in response, a strange sound through the suit's speakers, and almost fell back onto his knees again. With a screeching noise - indicating that Mark Omega had taken several hits - the suit finally dismantled completely. Piece after piece lifting from the sticky clothes beneath, it gave view of the battered and sweaty human inside of it.

It was an alarming sight. Tony looked pale, his face white and covered by a thin layer of cold sweat. There was a cloudy haze in his dark eyes, telling that he was at the verge of fainting. His shirt was soaked with blood, far more than what had been visible on the outside.

Still, the human managed to crack a lopsided grin at Loki.

"It's good to see you."

His smile became a little wider at the distressed little twitch it caused in Loki's face, then he grimaced again when the pain from the wound apparently flared up more violently for a second. His entire body was trembling.

"I think I have a little problem.."

The sentence was entirely superfluous: Now, it made sense why Tony had searched him. It was the only logical thing to do at this point and even close to fainting, the inventor always stayed logical. Mortal healers sure were capable to treat such a wound – but not in the right time. They would not be fast enough, or maybe not enough at all to heal a wound like this.

Loki did not say so aloud, but it was a wonder that Tony had not already lost consciousness. Stubborn little mortal...

"Lie down, I'm healing you."

"I hoped you would say that.", Tony responded with a strained smile, and complied to the god's wish, more giving in to gravity than lying down in a controlled motion.

While Loki knelt down at his side, the other Avengers were watching quietly. Only the Captain looked as if he was about to say something, to object in any way, but even he did not dare to intervene and let Loki do his work.

All concerns about his extensive usage of his magic or the consequences this might have for him later on were banished from his mind now. His complete attention was absorbed by the body under his hands when he shoved the shirt Tony had been wearing upwards – carefully avoiding to touch the cut too much - revealing the wound beneath.

Exposed like this, it looked even worse. Fatal, definitely deep at least, even if he mentally subtracted the smeared blood around it. No, this could not wait any longer.

"You know the procedure. Try not to scratch it afterwards."

The energy that had still been glowing beneath the surface was back to his avail in seconds. Where it had been tearing apart limps from bodies and heads from shoulders, the very same energy now poured into his fingertips to heal the other's body.

Once it started to seep in the marred tissue beneath, the wound began to disappear quickly. There was a sharp intake of breath from Tony the second the magic spread beneath his skin, but then, he lied perfectly still. Exploring the ruptured cells inside, Loki forced them to change their position, brought back together what was meant to be together and tried not to think about the serious blood-poisoning
which would most certainly have been the delayed cause of death if anybody else than him had

treated this wound.

Seconds later, nothing was left but a scar. Admittedly this scar was more salient than the ones left

behind by previous healing spells and would most definitely stay as a lifelong reminder. Yet, what
did a scar matter?
The only thing that mattered was that Tony was alive and the battle was over.

An exhausted sigh escaped his lips, then he sat back on his haunches and closed his eyes for a
second.
The god did not want to admit it, but he was in desperate need for a break. The Tesseract's power
had not receded yet, the battle's excitement still fresh and surging through his blood. He knew,
though, that it would not last much longer.
And then, the pain would be back and Loki was sure that he would not be able to keep himself on
his legs this time.

Fortunately, there would be no need for it now.

When the god opened his eyes again, Tony, now looking a little bit more alive, had sat up and
before Loki even knew what was happening, kissed him with all the passion his tired body could
muster.
"I'm awfully, embarrassingly happy that you are alive.", the human muttered against his lips, and
Loki made a playful scoff in return.

"As if I would let myself be killed by these creatures..."

Thankfully, nobody made an unnecessary comment about their kiss. Loki would never be affected
by it, he was used to scolds, and what he did here was hardly the worst they knew him to do. Yet
he still had a hard time accepting that what had blossomed in their shared privacy was now on
display for everybody else.

Somewhere above the ocean echoed the noise of thunder, closely followed by the infernal roar of
the serpent as it fell into the floods, struck to death by Mjölnir.

Once they had separated again, Tony tentatively stretched the fresh skin to determine whether it
still hurt. The spell seemed to have been successful – of course it was – since there was no longer a
pained expression on the mortal's face.

Having done his duty, Loki looked back up and around, his gaze roaming over the different faces
gathered here. Roger's eyes were directed upwards, obviously waiting for Thor to return, while
Barton still eyed the two men on the ground with a weird look on his face.
Somewhere a few feet afar, the Hulk had sat down on the ground, still idly playing around with the
dead Chitauri. It gave a more than strange and macabre sight, but as long as it did not come for
him, Loki was fine with whatever the beast did.

Shaking his head slowly, the inventor beside of him chuckled once at this poor display of
triumphant joy, then got up on his feet again like he had not been the one dying a few seconds
earlier.
Loki was too tired to be unnerved by this behavior.

"Hey, come on. Victory! We won in like.. an hour or so. Or two, I don't know - what does it matter:
They lost big-time!"
Arms spread wide, Tony turned around, looking at all of them one after the other, trying to induce at least a small smile on their faces.

"You took a potentially lethal stab wound in your stomach - don't boast like that."

With less grace than usually, the god had come up on his feet as well, laying his hand on the other's lower arm and scolding him with a challenging, yet sympathetic look. This caused at least a snicker from Barton's side, before their all gazes turned towards the noise of a sudden thud when Romanoff landed on the ground behind them.

"I think this is almost mandatory for him by now.", she said dead-pan, cocking her head to the side to free her face from hair.

Then, with a few steps, she took position in between them, standing close to Barton who looked a bit baffled about her sudden appearance from out of nowhere.

"Where did you just..?"

Her only answer was a little smirk in his direction, but Loki did not notice what Tony was about to respond. Attacking without a warning, nausea and a loss of balance came over him with overwhelming intensity. From a second to another, everything went white and shaky and in sudden panic, his grip on Tony's arm tightened to a degree where it would be painful for the human.

The mortal's head whirled around, this time with the concern written all over his face, but Loki barely paid attention to it. Heat was rolling through his body, scorching hot, and he started sweating violently, shivers running through his skin. All of his concentration focused on not giving in to his buckling knees, he needed some time to notice that the other was watching him, but as soon as he had realized, he managed to pull himself together again.

He was not supposed to be the one fainting. Forcing a smile on his mouth, he hoped to dispel any concerns, but probably it was not only misplaced but downright painful to look at.

Loki had been exhausted back after their fight in the Chitauri ship, strained and tired and ready to sleep for a week, but it had not been like this before. Loki felt as if he could drop unconscious every moment, as if he was sick.

"He doesn't look good."

Rogers was the one to bring it up before Tony could, but when both Loki and he simultaneously launched to say something in his defense, the supersoldier froze in his movements and a strange expression appeared on his face, entirely unfitting for any conversation they had had before.

The next few seconds happened so fast that neither of them even had the chance to comprehend what was going on.

Abruptly, Rogers hurled around and yanked his shield up in defense, the thick Vibranium creating a loud bang when it hit what looked like nothing but air. Then, he suddenly lost hold of his shield and doubled over, eyes wide in surprise, before he went to the ground with a agonized groan.

With disbelieving horror, all of them were banned to watch the blood sploshing out of a wound in his right chest and out of his mouth, soaking his uniform with a quickly growing dark stain.

Yet, before his body even had completely touched the ground, a blur of something heavy rushed past their heads and then Mjolnir hit its aim.

A numb cracking thud, the sound of air being forcefully pressed out of somebody's lungs, then something big and dark flickered into being behind the wounded soldier, stumbling a few steps
backwards from the impact.

As if it was not enough that Loki was at the verge of fainting and Tony just freshly healed, they had to encounter another monstrosity, spit out by the depths of space.

Only that this time, whatever they were – they were not as foolish as their predecessors. They were fast – six of them, as Loki could count now – even too fast to be visible for his own advanced eyesight. Maybe this was only due to his nausea and the terrible noise in his head.

Whatever had just been hit by Mjolnir was gone again the next moment, vanishing in a black blur and starting to run around them in circles. More out of reflex than in a thought-through battle strategy, their group tried to gather as close as possible, back to back and weapons raised to defend themselves against whatever was attacking them. On the ground in front of them was their leader, body convulsing in pain, rasping for air.

Tony just managed to save himself back into his dented suit, before, the second his face-plate closed, one of the shadows jumped at him. The impact was strong enough to send the heavy Iron Man suit tumbling away from the group. Unsure if his eyes were playing tricks on him, Loki whirled around to gaze after him, but then he saw it: planted on his chestplate, a tiny blinking device which was definitely not part of his suit. He wanted to yell, but then Tony noticed it as well. Only in the last moment, he tore it off and threw it away before it exploded mid-air in a burst of violet light.

Those beasts speed would be the death of them, all of them – and Loki could hardly stay on his legs any longer.

His hectic gaze switched to the others again. The Hulk had risen from his crouching position on the ground, running after one of the shadows without a chance of catching it. A little bit further away, Thor and Hawkeye had ended up back to back, defending themselves against the racing shadows surrounding them. The Widow was blocking the attacks of another with an almost super-human speed, showing an incredible skill with a Chitauri-Blade she had just plucked from the ground.

Loki found it more and more difficult to focus – his mind was blurring every few seconds, the ground swaying beneath his feet. Yet, he could not allow himself to show any weakness against these things. Soft as the whiff of a feather, something graced Loki's side. A second, blood splashed from a wound over his ribs, yet strangely, he did not feel it. The only thing he felt was the pulsing of his own heartbeat in his veins, the pounding in his head and the heat inside of him.

Still, he needed to focus – not to fight, though. Everyone else around seemed to busy to do what obviously needed to be done immediately. With one leap, the god was at the Captain's side. The color of his face had rapidly changed from a healthy reddish tone to a deadly white and thick dark blood was leaking out of his mouth, still coming in pulsing splashes from the wound: A knife stuck above the right collarbone.

If not for the superhuman strength, he would be dead by now.

Yet, he had no chance to analyse it longer. Just in time, Loki managed to fend off another attack, before the Chitauri could end what it had started. Once again and against all his instincts, he had called for his magic, feeling how the scorching hot ends of his fingers grazed into something
metallic, and then, seconds later, into flesh.

The Chitauri screeched, but it did not stop in its mad run. With another swipe into the air – more luck than anything else – Loki managed to graze it another time as it tried to attack, though only superficial.

In the short span of time before another attack, Loki tried to lift the Captain off the street and carry him away. He bent down, but then felt a the cold metal of a sharp blade slice his back. With a violent whirl he let go of the human again, only to hit nothing but air with his energy-blast.

No chance to keep on fighting like this.

Rogers would be dead within the next few minutes if they (or, more precisely just Loki with his sad abilities in healing magic) did not do anything.
Yet, they could not beat the creatures if they moved at that speed, they could not even as much as see how they looked like. Their group had been scattered over the entire area, everyone firing blindly in the air. Had it not been that dangerous to himself, Loki would have laughed about it.

The only ones left at the original spot were Rogers and he himself, and that only because he put all his effort into defending the Captain, getting attacked from all directions.

"Don't you dare to die on me, now! This would make a very bad impression.", the god muttered to the rasping human on the ground, fighting off the attacking alien another time.
He almost managed to grasp it, the horny hard skin already grazing his fingertips, but then it was gone again.

No, they could not keep on fighting like this.

How could they be so fast? It was impossible for them to move at that speed on their own – they were either supported by magic, or by some technology unknown to him. At least that would mean that they could be stopped.
They needed to be stopped, because Loki doubted he could muster the concentration to break another of their spells. Keeping standing straight was enough of a challenge right now.

Fortunately, he was not the only one to get this idea.

"I'm sure they're using some kind of technology!", the archer's words were interrupted as he had to fight off his attacker.

"Can you create some kind of EMP, Stark?".

Loki heard Barton's voice yelling above the field as well as a low buzzing noise from the Captain's intercom.

"Just a sec- I'm a bit busy here!", Tony responded from the other side of the battlefield, the sound of repulsors echoing from the house walls. Of course, they hit nothing but air, blowing the already damaged city to pieces.

The next moment, Loki felt it, though. A sudden shift of energy in the air as whatever Tony had unleashed from his suit cut through everything around him, the entire visible and invisible matter, even through his own body.

For a moment, the screeching noise in his ears increased to a degree that they became unbearable. Nausea overwhelmed him, forcing him to his knees and turning the world black. Then, all of sudden it was gone again.
When Loki lifted his head, the tiny vicious eyes of a tall creature stared back at him.

Surprised that its device had stopped working, it had ceased moving just a couple of feet away. It was a Chitauri – that much was sure. At the same time, it looked different from anything he had seen in their enormous army of deformed beasts.

It lacked the typical bulk, was almost skinny, and had four extremely long, almost spider-like arms instead. Morphed into one organic whole, blades were attached to the end of them. Dark-gray skin and tiny eyes, just like all of them had, its reptile face covered by a sleek and sharp Chitauri-helmet.

Now, Loki remembered what they were.

He had only seen them briefly before, but it had been long enough to recall them now. They were assassins, bred into the Chitauri-army for only one purpose – a purpose they were perfectly designed for.

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After the EMP, Tony just stared at the motionless beast for a second, appalled by its alien ugliness. Whereas killing Chirauri had turned out as relatively easy for them during the last battle, those creeps were definitely not ordinary Chitauri. Yet, he had robbed them of their most valuable weapon - their speed.

If he could see them, he could aim at them and then, they were vulnerable just like anything else on earth and beyond.

A high-pitched screech tore through the air, a battle-cry most likely, and the time-out was broken. With a mad jump, the alien assassin was onto him again.

Against his intentions or will, the inventor found himself slowly walking backwards, fighting off well-aimed blades with his arms as good as he could. Despite their dulled abilities, they were still fast, faster than a human could react. Their arms were not only long, but sneaky, bending in angles which looked everything else than comfortable. If not for the suit, he would by now be sliced to neat niblets on the floor.

In front of his eyes, the metallic blur of Chitauri blades rushed past, the repeating noise of metal clattering against metal rang in his ears. It was too close to fire a repulsor blast, the loading time was too long and anyway – that fucker would be gone as soon as the blue in Tony's palms lit up.

Suddenly, a startled scream distracted him, audible in the intercom as well as outside of his helmet. It was Natasha's voice, obviously. Never he had heard her scream before. Ever.

Her usually so agile body had been thrown to a corner, immediately assuming a position which shielded her vital organs from following hits. Above her, now way slower than necessary, the beast she had been fighting was hovering. Its weight supported on its two large blades, it had its face right in front of hers, like a tarantula over her prey, showing its ugly teeth.

"Tasha-!", Barton's voice echoed over the street, but was cut off by another attack, his arrows unable to fire in her direction, since he was occupied with not dying. The impulse to run for her almost cost him his life, as the razor sharp blade was fended off by Thor only by a hair's breadth.

The noise of impact from blade against hammer was drowned by a deep roar, though. Out of nowhere, the Hulk leaped over the battlefield, and before that spider thing over Natasha could even turn around, its head was hit by a fist almost double in size.

The rangy body was hurled to the side - enough time for Natasha to get on her feet again.

A little slowed down, but by far not immobile, the alien found its stance again and went for the
Hulk. Mid-running, the green monster's grab brought it to an unexpected halt, the long blades waving uselessly about as it could not move its arms one inch to the side. The Hulk bared his teeth, the roar from his mouth almost blowing away the creature's helmet.

From behind him, the Widow set in for a bold jump, nothing reminding of the curled up person on the floor from seconds ago.

Tony could not believe his eyes at first, but she did it: nimble and quick, she climbed on top of the Hulk's broad muscular back. His gaze went upwards for a second, warily, but when he realized who it was and what happened, he let her do what she could do best.

The small body of hers a strange contrast to the green mass that carried her, she wrapped her legs around the Hulk's neck, sitting calm, despite the eruptions from fighting. Natasha's face was calm, too, yet you could see the concentration on it, the exhaustion.

She would not let this chance pass, though. Never she would let anything live that had come that close to kill her. One fluid motion and she pulled out the Chitauri blade she had attached to her back again, then heaved it in the air and brought it down with all power.

A small crack was all - but it was enough.

Entering on the top of his head, the blade penetrated the Chitauri's skull, emerging again from its chin. It was dead immediately, the life in his eyes flickering out, so she loosened her grip on the blade, looking momentarily tired. The Hulk bellowed his anger at the dead beast a last time, then tossed it to the side to turn around.

One dead, five more to go.

Still, the fast yet gruesome death of their comrade did not deter the Chitauri's motivation the least. Like evolving to a different level of speed, another dimension of fury, they attacked with a newly awakened power.

Their fast movements enabled them to fight Clint into a corner between two houses, a place from where escape was as impossible as making use of his bow. The archer was forced to fight for is life using nothing but his dagger. He might be a pro, but the bad constellation of an unfamiliar weapon and a Chitauri moving almost with the velocity of light made him do nothing than slice air into peaces.

The Hulk had taken on hunting another of the Chitauri again, trying to hit it with the body of its dead companion. Every time its limb, lifeless body hit the ground, it looked a little more like an old rag than a creature.

When he turned around, he could see Loki, too.

From somewhere a little offside, almost entirely hidden in the shadows of the remaining ruins of the highway, the sound of breaking bones echoed through the city. Seemingly, Loki had finally managed to get a hold of the alien that had been attacking him.

Motivated by this success, Tony tore his gaze away and took off to help out Clint. The fighting Chitauri made a perfect aim, distracted from the archer in front of him, his back unprotected.

It did not come to this, though. Of course, he could not have his way for once - the day had already been shit for him, being almost killed and all that, so fate seemed to have thought: Why not add a little bit more shit just for the sake of it.

Mid-air, a Chitauri-grenade hit him before he could get even close to help out his teammate. The explosion was strong enough to hurl him to the other side of the destroyed street, his body crashing right through a wall and into a building.

There seemed to be a theme developing today, including a wall and himself crashing through it. It
did not need Jarvis voice to tell him that Loki would most likely need to stitch him up a second time.

With an unnerved groan, Tony got up from lying on his back, dust and small parts of debris falling from him when he did. Although his back felt like he was freshly coming from the chiropractor, he could at least still walk. Momentarily forgotten by the Chitauri, he had the chance to throw another look on the situation. He came to the conclusion that the situation was shit.

When those beasts were of the opinion that they could kill them off one by one after the Avengers had defeated thousands of their less fortunate comrades on their own, then they needed to fucking get their shit together.

Not today Tony would have their victory contested.

Trying to get that thought out of his head as good as he could, he still could not help himself but look for Loki. The god was in bad condition, additionally burdened with a lethally wounded, but still, there were no more fighting noises coming from the shadows under the highway he had withdrawn into. Tony did not know whether this was good or bad... What he did know, though, was that there was no way he would let that one beast which had just escaped the Hulk's clutches stick its nose into just this shadow.

Setting aiming mechanisms to mark 12 spots around the Chitauri's claw-like feet - jettisoning every thought he had had about saving ammunition before - he set a last one to a destination yet to be calculated. If he could foretell the future as good as he thought, then there was a good chance that this last one would set that Chitauri's head on fire.

"Hey, Slenderman!"

The aliens' head jerked around in the direction of the noise and for a second, it slowed down, seemingly surprised that the explosion had not killed him yet. Tony did not leave him the time to run for another attack.

"Show me how you dance."

Twelve small grenades were released from the plates on his back in time intervals of a few milliseconds, raining down to the aliens feet one after the other. Limited, but strong explosions made ground and earth fly up and the Chitauri's feet hop to the side to escape contact. It had no chance, though - every time it wanted to dash out to one side, another explosion hit. The small display of his ammunition status became smaller and smaller, Tony noticed with upcoming regret, and eventually, the last fired. Its buzzing path through the air was too fast to be followed with eyes, but then eventually, it hit. Another explosion, mangling flesh and strangely formed bones, and the Chitauri assassin's chest was blown to pieces. It fell over and hit the ground a second later, a revolting blueish black soup oozing out of his ribcage.

"That was not the head.", Tony stated, slightly displeased.

He had no time to reanalyse his calculations, though, but rushed off to where the situation was hairiest.

"Heard you asked for a lift?"

Unclear whom exactly he was addressing through the intercom, it soon became clear from the
direction he was taking. Flying a straight path only a few feet over the ground, he reached a remarkable speed in a few seconds.
The impact of the flying suit hurled the Chitauri he was crashing into from its feet and caused himself a severe bump to the head, yet he was still conscious enough to grab the expectantly outstretched hand of Clint in a firm grip and tear the cornered archer from the ground to a height more fitting for his profession.

“Get me over to the one the Hulk is chasing! Fast!”

Clint, already grabbing behind his back to get his bow, motioned to one of the aliens that was running from the green mass of muscles that was the Hulk. Its long legs were wobbling strangely, but with an incredible speed as it ran, dodging every attack of those gigantic green fists that tried to get hold of him.

Even from above, Tony could make out several cuts in the Hulk’s flesh as well – small, but oozing green blood. Yet, no one was concerned for him (Tony was still not sure what equipment you needed to come up with to actually do the Hulk lethal damage). What it showed, though, was how capable their enemies were.

Trying to fly as steady as he could, he hovered right above the alien – its movements still too fast and skipping to be hit by a repulsor blast – Clint readied his bow and drew the string taut. Even held in such a height, clutched to the chest of an metallic armor, he was remarkably calm and concentrated.
If one could hit an aim like this, it was him.

One movement of his finger and the arrow flipped off the string, but instead of hitting the Chitauri it exploded into a net. The alien was caught inside, its spidery limbs immediately entangling into the enhanced fabric, small metallic hooks sticking to its skin.
It was released from its desperate struggle the moment the Hulk got his hands onto one of the long limbs. Hurling the entire alien against the next facade, again and again, until the body became limp and the arm was broken on so many places that it wobbled in an almost hilarious way.

“Good one.”, he commented, then dropped Clint on a roof from where he could overlook the entire street, heading off to fight the remaining two aliens.

It was strange though, as his sensors did not pick its signature up at first. If this last one was about to pull some magic trick now, he would be there before it could get ideas. He rushed further upwards until he had a great range of vision over the battlefield, searching for it in the labyrinth of scattered corpses and still moving bodies beneath.
Eventually, he spotted the dark mass of limbs in an alley and a gleeful grin crept on his lips. Not a magic trick, no: more a cowardly plan to escape certain death, that guy was limping awkwardly towards a more silent area of the city, only one of its two log legs left.

At least one thing would be easy today.

Going full speed, Tony jolted downwards like an eagle diving for its prey, already imagining the snapping of the beasts neck between his hands. He had to break heavily, though, as only a few feet away from the running alien somebody else landed in front of it.

Thor grinned widely as the creature bumped into him, mindlessly trying to get away. One upward swing of Mjölnir hit the Chitauri at the underside of its chin, the resounding crack so loud that it almost hurt to hear.
The dead body flew high up in the air, passing even the highest roofs of the surrounding buildings,
before it eventually slowed down and then, very slowly at first, but with increasing speed, fell back
down.
Another splashing noise and it was nothing than a mushed, lifeless heap of dirt on the asphalt.

“You should work on your speed, Tony Stark!”, the god bellowed, and took off towards the spot
where Loki had been with Steve only a moment ago.

Tony hovered in the air for a few seconds, torn between feeling honestly insulted or glad that
another of those ugly fuckers was dead. He decided for the latter and made a quick swerve in the
air to get back in the open road.
There was still one of them left - or, should he say: ONLY one of them left.

Soon, the last of the six assassins would face the same fate as had its comrades before. It would die
by the hands of one of them and then, hopefully, this would be over for today. Even though he
liked to patter through this fight, he did not know how he would stand another few hours of this.
His ammunition was close to zero, he was reduced to the the power the Tesseract gave his repulsor
blasts - which was horrendous but not sufficient if the man wielding that power was not running on
100%.
Right now, he felt more like 34%. The stab wound was healed, yes, but he had lost blood and his
face had been smashed into more than a dozen walls today.

Also, he had not seen anything of Loki and Cap for a long time now. No, they could ALL need a
break. Every party, even the best ones, had a turning point somewhere around 4 in the morning and
it felt like they were severely bearing down on it.

On the street, the tables had turned, as it looked like.

The last of the skinny beasts was faced by a group of three really pissed off looking Avengers:
Clint on the roof, bow-string taut and ready to fire (there were already two missed arrows sticking
out of the ground around him, a rare sight which really spoke for the alien's abilities) and the
strange, but surprisingly well-functioning collaboration of Natasha and the Hulk. Tony's gaze
lingered a second on the scene, then flickered over to the street where he had seen Thor vanish.
That decision was an easy one.

When Tony arrived, Loki was sitting on the ground, back leaning against a wall. He had both his
hands on Steve's neck, the blonde head resting in his lap, already unconscious. In the first second,
horror struck Tony, because he looked not only unconscious, but dead, but the feeling fizzled out
when hen saw the look of concentration on Loki's face as he worked his magic on the man which
had been his sworn enemy until yesterday.
Thor was waiting a few feet further, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings, Mjolnir still
ready to strike.

Within a second, Tony' faceplate opened and he hurried over, Loki's name already on his lips. A
step forward, then he was silenced by a warning look from Thor, who put his finger to his lips and
slowly shook his head.

"Yeah, I know he has to concentrate. I know that procedure, thank you very much!", Tony hissed,
not knowing exactly why he reacted so harshly.

In that moment, their attention was on the two men on the floor again, as a shuddering breath left
Steve's mouth, like a drowning man coming to air after a long struggle. His eyes abruptly opened
and his chest was heaving heavily as he sat up a bit too quick.
Before he or one of the two others could say a word, Loki's hands let go of the Captain, bereft of all power, then his body fell to the side like a sack of spuds.

Chapter End Notes

Exams are over, chapters will be coming more frequently from now on :D
Let's see if we can get chapter 60 up until April 1st :P

Comments are very much appreciated! <3
Departure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Returning to Steve's house took them longer than Bruce liked, but - considering the circumstances of their hasty departure - nobody could complain. The Quinjet was miraculously still intact, standing where Clint had landed him without a single scratch. Bruce did not exactly remember how they eventually disappeared from the battlefield. The first thing he remembered after hulking out was waking up on the steel bench inside the machine, clad in an army blanket to cover his inevitable nakedness. Somebody had been kind enough to put a pair of extra clothing at his side and nobody said a word when he changed. They were all too busy with themselves anyway.

All of them knew that this was morally not the best thing to do. They were retreating before the fight was officially over, before they could be sure that the people were safe. Yet, only a quick look around was enough for Bruce to note that neither of them was in any condition to be of help – except for Thor, who then again was too concerned about his brother to let himself be distracted by anything else.

Natasha was covered in bruises, her left ankle and ribs sprained, forcing her to limb visibly. Clint, too, was covered in nasty cuts, reminders of the Chitauri's sharp blades. His right side was slightly scorched by an explosion, nothing dramatic, but bad enough to make him grimace every time his shirt touched his skin.

Tony was silent, sitting at Loki's side until they reached the house again. He was still swaying a bit when he walked, the effect of a concussion, additional to several nasty bruises and open wounds. Steve looked pale as a ghost and, on the quiet, no one thought that he would do anything else today than falling into his bed.

Nobody begrudged him - he had just survived an injury that would have killed every normal human.

The problem demanding most of the attention though, was the unconscious God of Mischief.

Nobody knew exactly what was wrong with Loki. He had not moved an inch since he had fallen over, yet there were no visible injuries on the outside. All they could do was placing him onto the sofa in the living room as a makeshift sickbed and let the doctor have a look at him.

Thor was had positioned himself somewhere close to the couch, looking worried and protective in a way that was new to Bruce, while Tony had taken place on one of the other seats, more to Steve's side. Their Captain looked as if he would fall asleep at any moment, but refused to be brought to bed. Not before he knew what was the matter with Loki.

Bruce's doctor's case, more or less sufficiently stuffed, was already opened and standing on the table. Around him, it was absolutely quiet. They were all waiting to know what his examination of the god would bring and if this had not been exactly his metier, Bruce might have felt a little nervous.

Even before the doctor had so much as laid a hand on Loki, he could feel the heat radiating from his body. You could see it for days now, but it was undeniable under his fingers: this body was fighting something with all its power. If they just knew what...

At first, Bruce carefully opened one of Loki's eyes and took a look at it. The iris was still glowing in a bright blue – the entire eye seemed to glow from the inside. The pupils were wide, the dilation
almost unnatural, and there was no reaction when he pointed his little flashlight at them. After that, Bruce delivered the usual procedure: Checking pulse and blood pressure and sounding the god's breathing with a stethoscope. He did everything in a concentrated silence, now and then frowning or muttering inaudible half-sentences to himself. The god's body proposed a conundrum of symptoms he knew, but could not refer to a certain source. At least heart and lungs seemed to be working fine, but something else had Bruce worried: Strange, occasional twitches of Loki's hands, as if electric surges were jolting through the muscles.

“It might be the magic. Its use is tiring for the body and even more so for the mind. Maybe he is just exhausted.”

Thor's voice faded away into the silence of the room unanswered. He did not sound persuaded at all.

“I can't say what it is, for the symptoms don't really make sense to me... he seems to be stable, but it looks as if he suffered neuronal damage. Although, this is very vaguely put.”

That was one of the worst things of being a medical doctor – telling other people about the illnesses the ones close to them suffered from. It was good to tell people that they would soon be healthy again, that their sickness was almost over... yet, here, he could not even exactly give a name to the symptoms. Thor's frown deepened even more, and Tony rubbed a hand through his face in an exhausted manner. Then, he got up and moved closer, hunkering down at Bruce's side.

“Let me take a look...”

Bruce moved away, wondering what Tony wanted to inspect. The inventor seemed to look for something very specific, going directly for Loki's back. He had some effort in turning the god's limb body to the side, but eventually, he managed. His fingers stroked along Loki's neck, pushing the hair away from his nape, to reveal...

“Tony, what is that?”

Bruce moved closer again, pushing his glasses right to have a look at the coin-sized piece of metal that was stuck at the base of Loki's skull. It reminded faintly of some kind of plug for a cable, like things he had seen in science fiction movies. But why on earth should...

“How did you think we got the Tesseract's energy transferred? It's not that easy.”

“Does he have more of those somewhere?

“Eight smaller implants in his spine. They stabilize the energy.”

“What were you thinking?!”

Bruce could not help himself but sound more than a little bit aghast. Sure, there was no need to make the other feel even more miserable – or responsible - than he already did, but still: How a smart man like Tony Stark could come up with such a plainly stupid idea was beyond Bruce's imagination.

"I was thinking of a way to make use of the single greatest energy source in the universe by using scrap metal - from looking at the results, we can all agree that it worked pretty fucking good, don't you think?!"
Tony's answer was more a verbal assault than a normally articulated sentence, implicating that this topic seemed to touch some vulnerable spot the others did not know about yet. The inventor's lips were pressed together in a thin line, his eyes full of restrained worry when he touched the metallic spot on the god's neck.

Bruce had to breathe in deeply to keep himself back from lashing out with all kinds of medical risks that came into his mind when he even imagined the conditions under which such highly dangerous operations had been performed. Dirty cellars, dirty material, bad light, sleep deprivation...

"You're a mechanic, Tony, you're not a surgeon! You can't DO this just like that. People can get infections, diseases - a living body of a conscious being is not a place to implant your unverified bleeding edge technology!"

"Friends, keep down your voices. Even though the Tesseract's energy might be overwhelming for my brother's body, he shows not the alarming signs I have seen of magicians being consumed by their magic. He is fighting it bravely and will recover much quicker than you can imagine once those implants are removed from him."

Thor sounded calmer than he needed to be, considering the fact that it was his just newly retrieved brother who was lying there on the couch unconsciously, the greedy alien energy sucking out his vitality. Yet, it was what they needed to hear at the moment - and it took the words right out of Bruce's mouth.

Gently, but with determination, he shoved Tony aside. The other was reluctant at first, but then moved over to allow the doctor to have a look at the small, barely visible metallic piece in Loki's neck. Upon running down his hand on Loki's spine, he could feel it even through layers of skin and muscle: eight spots radiating an energy even hotter than Loki's heated body already was. For him, it felt like an infection, a bad one, but somehow, he had the feeling that this was more. You did not mess with the Tesseract without paying a price...

There was only one logical implication following from this.

"We have to take them out."

"It's not that simple. He will cut your throat and feed on your tongue if he wakes up and finds himself robbed - and that's just what's in store for you. I don't know what he will do to me."

Several pairs of eyes went over to the engineer. Bruce could not understand why Tony would want these deadly - and they would, in a matter of time, become deadly - things to be kept inside the person he cared so much about.

His questioning eyes seemed to speak enough, since the other immediately went on. Seemingly, this too was not an entirely new topic of discussion. Bruce wondered what had occurred in the process of establishing that kind of technology that it caused that much affect now.

"Look, I talked myself blue in the face to change his mind, but he is obsessed with this energy. He fought a war for this and he will fight a dozen more - don't do it now. I will talk to him when he wakes up."

Not entirely convinced, the doctor's features turned into a frown.

“\You said talking didn't work.\”, Bruce eventually stated, turning back to his patient who was still lying motionlessly on the couch. It took him a few moments to register that Loki was actually awake, looking at him with his strange glowing blue eyes and dilated pupils. He did not look entirely present, much less close to something you could call 'sane', but at least he was awake.
“You can't take them out-”, the god murmured, voice low and tired,-not yet. You know it Tony, you can tell them. There still is something I have to do.”

Loki's gaze shifted to the human behind Bruce, staring at him intensively. There seemed to be something going on between the two, something no other person in the room could quite grasp.

“What is he talking about? What do you have to do?”, Thor interrupted, successfully gaining his brother's attention.

“No secrets between us now, brother. You know that these things matter to all of us!”

The younger god only growled in response and rolled himself to the side, showing Thor that he was no longer interested in conversation. Fortunately, Steve rose from the couch - strong enough, but a little bit wobbly on the legs – to interrupt before Thor could get agitated any further about Loki's behavior.

“Loki, you protected me and saved my life when I was wounded. I have to thank you... and apologize for the things I imputed to you earlier. You did not deserve it.”

That seemed enough to arouse Loki's attention anew. Almost feline, the god moved his head from where he had half hidden it under his arms to look at Steve, before his skeptical gaze dropped to the outstretched hand the Captain was offering. With as much grace as one could muster in a lying position, he took it and shook it, before letting go rather quickly again.

“I accept your apology. Somehow, I had to compensate my attempt to kill you.”

Loki's mouth turned upwards to a tired but amused grin, which seemed to cost him his last bit of saved strength. His features turned exhausted, almost pained and he closed his eyes, hiding his face beneath his arms again.

“You should take him upstairs to the bed, Thor. No more arguing.”, Bruce instructed the older god, who complied with a grumpy face. If it had been up to him, he would probably have squeezed every little bit of information he could still offer out of Loki. Yet, he was intelligent enough to know that this was not the right moment.

Loki made a displeased growl when the blonde god lifted him off the couch bride-style, but did not struggle as he was carried away – a sure sign that his powers had reached the limit.

Bruce waited until the two gods were out of the room.

“So, what did Loki want you to tell us?”

With the other's attention back on him, waiting for him to reveal the great secret everybody was thrilled about, Tony decided that he had the right to sit down and make himself comfortable first. He was as tired as all of them, but now, when at least the worries about Loki had eased a bit, he felt exhaustion with much more force.

Letting his gaze wander over the faces around him for a second, he eventually let himself drop on the couch where Loki had been lying before and leaned back.

"What I can tell you is nothing more than hearsay. Loki's got the hot stuff, he has seen it himself, I just got one hell of a scary story from him."
He scratched his beard and watched as Bruce sat down as well - he looked like that typical post-Hulk fatigue seemed to overwhelm him almost any moment - still trying to pick the right words. Steve, although he looked extremely interested now, had to rest his hand on the back rest of one of the armchairs as well, just in case his strength might leave him.
This was almost like a team-meeting all over again, everybody bruised and battered after a fight won together. It could have been nice, close to the feeling they had shared after their first battles together. Yet, what he knew from Loki was everything but nice and certainly not what one wanted to hear after such a day.

"You ever thought about why the Chitauri came here in the first place?"

Looking in the other's eyes, the question was pretty much redundant. Of course they had.

"Their leader told them to. You haven't seen that guy yet, neither have I, but Loki has. From what he told me, he is no one to mess around with. He is no Chitauri, nor an Asgardian or anything we ever fought against. His name is Thanos and he is supposed to be a titan, although, for me, this sounds totally cribbed from the Greek. There are some other details about him like dating Death herself, but what you should know is the following: This will go on and on and on, for years and generations after us, if he is not killed - and killing him will not be as easy as this."

There was silence following this revelation. Tony wondered what was going on inside the other's heads, whether they believed him or whether this story sounded too far-fetched. He himself believed it, yet even though he knew that Loki would not lie about something like that, even he had problems in imagining what Thanos would look like. Or how he could be killed, for that matter.

"Where is he?"

Natasha was sitting on a chair further from the couch table, but she had listened well. Still, Tony could only shrug in response. He was not in the mood to be bombarded with questions he had not the knowledge to answer. What he wanted was to look after Loki, perhaps slip under his duvet and just sleep away the reminders of this day with his arms around the other, so that he could be sure of his presence.

"I heard of him, in the tales. Nobody has seen him and returned from that encounter alive or sane enough to tell. If what my brother told you is true, we face an enemy not conquered for thousands of years."

Apparently, Thor had returned from Loki's room fast enough to hear the important part of what Tony had said. He was leaning in the doorway now, arms crossed in front of his chest, his face serious in a way that it was frightening.

Whatever your opinion about your own importance in the universe - if you heard those gods talk in time spans like "a thousand years" with such casualty, you felt how short such a human life was in comparison.

"Do you know where he can be found? If he is there, behind one of those portals, then there has to be a way for us to use those portals as well. We will bring the war to his front door - he will never expect us."

"A brave thought, my friend, yet not as easily realized as you might think."

Tony listened Thor talk to the others for a few seconds, feeling how his gaze lost in the distance as the haziness of physical exhaustion came over him. He was not needed in this conversation right now, somebody else needed him more at the moment.
Nobody noticed – or at least nobody objected verbally - when he got up and left the room, slowly walking up the stairs with the noise of conversation fading in the background. He did not knock, but simply opened the door and sneaked inside, locking it behind him.

Loki was lying with his back towards the door, curled up inside of the blanket around him. Almost without making a noise, Tony walked closer and then sat down on the mattress at the god's side, peaking over his body to see his face.

"I would have carried you up here myself, but somehow your fragile little body contains the weight of a neutron star."

The god's eyes remained closed, but his face crumpled up a bit when he answered.

"Shut up, Tony."

"No physics jokes for you today?"

"I said: shut up."

Loki put his hands on his head, his face a display of fought down pain, forced relaxation. Tony almost felt guilty for saying something at all.

“Loki."

When the god did not answer, Tony laid a hand on his shoulder, rubbing small comforting circles there, trying to ease a bit of the tension which held that body in its firm grip. He would only go if Loki would tell him to do so - and even then he probably would just stay anyway.

The touch seemed to work: Eventually, Loki removed himself from his curled up position and turned his head slightly, his unnaturally blue eyes meeting the inventor's brown. Involuntarily, a shudder ran down his spine.

There might be still Loki looking with these eyes, but more and more it looked like a brightly blue veil closed between him and the outside world, as if the part which was really him became less and less visible.

His thoughts must had shown on his face, at least partly, because the god's lips turned into a sad smile.

“I'm fine Tony, don't worry."

They both knew that this was a blatant and obvious lie.

But what should he do? What should he say? There was no way he could do what everybody downstairs wanted him to do, because Loki was right: There was still something to be done. It did not mean, though, that removing that crap in the other's spine was not the first thing to be done when they returned from that fight victoriously. Which they would.

Tony had no answer for once, so he decided to keep his mouth shut. He merely laid down beside Loki and put his hands around the god's waist. As if they followed their own mind, his hands continued to rub the other's skin, conveying what he wanted to say when he lacked the actual words. After a few seconds, there was a sensible easing in Loki's body, a few seconds later, he let out a low sigh.

The genius only hummed – low and approvingly - then it became quiet again inside the room.

This was so much better than being downstairs with the others now, participating in endless discussions about Thanos and how to proceed. He had the feeling that, whatever the others would
finally decide, it was not their right to decide anyway. There would not be a decision without him and Loki.

Very quickly now, Tony became tired, but his mind refused to let him sleep. Drifting in and out of an uneasy slumber, thoughts ran through his head, pieces of conversations, ideas that moldered into dust before he could get a hold of them.

Time ticked by, with just the two of them, lost in their own little universe. It was that kind of dozing sleep that made you lose entire afternoons without noticing before it was too late. Tony only noticed that it was already the middle of the night when he heard Loki’s voice in the darkness.

“We have to go, Tony. We have to finish it, the sooner the better.”

It had been quiet for some time now, but Tony had been sure that Loki was not asleep. Neither of them could think about sleeping now, even though both of them had pretended to try. It was the middle of the night, all noises in the big house dimmed to a minimum and everybody asleep, except for the two of them.

“The portal is still open. I can break the shield that protects it.”

Since he had left the others behind in the living room a few hours prior, Tony had known that Loki would say something like that. He had thought about it as well, he had turned the pros and cons of numerous of varying procedures over and over in his head without coming to a better conclusion. They had to go alone, just the two of them. Of course, it would come down to them two in the end, everything else would not have fit their story. They had to go now, without anybody noticing, because anybody who would notice would try to stop them. Also, tomorrow they would certainly succeed in closing the portals one way or the other, or, what would be worse, more Chitauri would come out of there.

No, they needed to go right now, in this night. It was something new, to be the one in power to choose the precise moment for such a far-reaching decision.

Loki crawled forward and disentangled himself from Tony’s arms, sitting up in the bed. Even though he was listening intently, Tony did not move. He was still lying in the same position he had been in the entire time, only his dark eyes directed at Loki, watching him as he went on.

“You know what we have to do. And we have to do it alone. We can’t let them come with us, any of them - they are needed elsewhere. The Captain here, on Midgard, and Thor on Asgard. We can not allow that anything happens to them.”

When Tony looked into Loki’s face, he saw anticipation, an anticipation which was contagious. The inviolability of the fact that this night, it would finally end, both filled him with a deep rooted feeling of satisfaction and the hot burn of dreadful anticipation, the inner turmoil strong enough to make lying in bed an impossibility.

One movement and he had sat up, his gaze still locked with Loki’s. The god looked like he was using all his energy to keep it together, worse than any crack whore after a night of heavy partying. He looked sick, physically sick with something Tony could not wrap his head around and he looked like it would be nothing but irresponsible to send him to a fight again. Marginally, he noticed that the otherworldly glow in Loki’s eyes almost had the same color of his arc reactor which reminded him that there was one thing he had to get off his chest before they would do anything.

"When he is dead, I will personally remove the implants and you will give away the Tesseract to a
place where her powers are not available - for anybody. Promise me."

He chose his words and tone in a way that would not allow any kind of opposition and strangely, without needing another second of thought, Loki nodded. There seemed something akin to relief in his features, as if he had been waiting for somebody to take this decision off his shoulders.

There was no need to waste their breath to make more arrangements, they both knew what to do.

The engineer got into his warmest clothes, the more layers the better, until the moment when he started doubting that the suit would still fit around him. They were going to space now and he knew how it felt to be there. He knew the cold that crept inside of you, feeling so different from what it had ever felt on earth. While he got dressed and drank a few hands full of tap water, just in case, he contended with the difficulties to repress any memories of his last excursion to outer space.

The images came without warning and his heart was already beating violently, even though they had not even left earth yet.

No, this time, it would not end in falling.

He would not lose control and he would not lose contact. Loki was there with him and there was a reason he had made the Mark Omega suitable for space adventures of this kind.

The more he was telling himself that he would never be so reckless as to go on a mission like this without being absolutely sure that they had a chance to succeed, the more he felt like he way lying to himself, poorly lying, like a child pretending it had forgotten the homework in his backpack. Silently, inaudible for the other, he cursed to himself when he noticed the slight tremor of his hands.

All the while he was getting ready, Loki sat on the bed motionlessly, his eyes following Tony's every move. The intensity of his gaze made the inventor halt in what he was doing, delaying the final step a few seconds further.

As soon as he would put on the suit, there would be a thick layer of metal between him and Loki. No chance to feel him any longer, with his fingers protected by the metallic gloves, no chance to press his body against the others.

Yet, in the same time, he did not want to touch Loki now. Not that he was not craving for it, that it was the only thing he could think of for the endlessly long seconds he just stood there, staring at the other.

It was just that he was afraid that if he kissed him now, he would realize that there was nothing in this or in any other world worth putting at risk what he had in this very moment.

A deathly silence hung over Los Angeles as they left the safety of their room, the city still in a state of shock after the unexpected onslaught the day before. Even here, at the edge of it, one could see the marks that had been left by the battle, the destruction that had been caused by the Chitauri and those who had fought against them.

Tony forced his concentration on the sky – it would be over soon, either way.

Maybe, they would be successful in their mission to free the universe of the greatest threat it had ever faced from outside and then would witness the rebuild. Or they would die trying, and no longer be bothered by the fate of the living. Everything was possible now and it was not like a thought you could easily block out.

The remaining portal was still shining brightly above the city, a gaping circle of blue and violet
light burned into the sky itself, stars within stars, a strange sight. It would only be a matter of minutes to reach it with the Mark Omega, not even a whole minute – Tony had a countdown burned inside of his memory.

The engineer was standing somewhere behind Loki, somehow caught between wanting to postpone their departure as long as possible and the urge to rush up there and make this end as quickly as possible. Of course, Loki noticed that he was faltering. He really was that easy to read nowadays...

“We should leave, before they notice. Carry me up, I will get us through the shield.”

This was his cue, if he wanted to or not. Tony shut off any thoughts which did not revolve around moving his body and working the suit. A few steps, then his arms closed around Loki from behind and with a rush of cold air, they were flying. Upwards, only one direction now. With unrestrained speed, he could watch the houses shrinking beneath them while the portal's flare became brighter and brighter with every second. At the height of about 1300 feet, they bypassed a helicopter hovering nearby, but the machine made no attempt to stop them – could not have done it anyway – and Tony wondered what people sat in the cockpit now and what they probably thought about them.

It felt sickening to be that close to the portal – the closer he came, the more his body rebelled against it, a perfectly healthy, natural response he had to ignore completely.

When Jarvis displayed the portal's shield as only a few feet in front of them, suddenly something sliced a hole in it with ease, destroying the last barrier between them and the endless void behind the portal.

Tony could already see the stars behind it, and then then they were through, engulfed by the light, before the darkness of the void swallowed up everything.

Chapter End Notes

The finale is coming closer D:
And OMG, over 300k words and almost 900 kudos >_
The second he was sucked into the abyss of space, everything he held onto became relativated.

Coldness, such a coldness that it crept through the suit and his clothes, devouring skin, muscles and bone, filling him from the inside with an unspeakable feeling of dread. The intense black of space, darker than a human's pupil, darker than oil. Pure, deep black. Endless, literally endless, depending on which theory you believed in - but theories did not hold the primate of verity here. There was no theory needed to know that nothing of you would remain to arrive anywhere if you drifted into that blackness.

There was no aim, nothing like up and down existed any more. He was still flying like before, but there was no system he was moving within. This part of space had never been mapped. This part of space itself was only a theory. Nothing to hold on to. A few stars scattered in that blackness, but not concrete. They were millions of lightyears away, impossible to reach, to use as a fixed point.

Maybe man had left his footsteps on the moon. Maybe man was orbiting around earth in a space station, sending home funny Youtube videos. Space had allowed man to do that, because it did not meant anything. This here was something differend entirely.

Even though he was still moving forward, Tony had the feeling of falling.

In front of them, something stood out of that darkness. Lit by a light that seemed to belong here, glowing differently than it had done on earth, was a city. It was floating, yet it was motionless, a fixed point in the incomprehensive vastness of space. Impossible to estimate the distance, the height if the highest towers. It was huge, though. Gigantic. A fortress of an unbelievable scale, build upon a labyrinth wire system, strangely glowing metal morphing into solid gleaming rock, as black as the darkness beyond. There was nothing organic about it, and yet, it looked alive by something other than what life meant for him. A different form of life, illuminated by an orange light from deep within, becoming more and more violet on the edges. He blinked a few times, trying to determine whether it was actually pulsing or whether he was just freaking out. His mouth was dry, making every time he swallowed feel like eating sandpaper.

There were no Chitauri here. They were alone, completely alone.

Behind him, the portal became smaller and smaller, but the city in the sky never seemed to come any closer. They were nothing but dust compared to this and suddenly, all their efforts became ridiculous and their plan nothing but mad. The feeling attacked him from within, grabbing his ribcage in an iron grip and pressing it together mercilessly.

They were not supposed to be here.

His heart started racing, desperately trying to escape the ever shrinking cage of his chest. All air seemed to be pressed out of his lungs, forcing him to sharp small intakes of breath, not enough to supply his brain.
They were not supposed to be here.

The urge to return overwhelmed him with a force so strong that his whole body started shaking. If they would not return, they would die. He would die, surely he would die in this endeavor. Suddenly, the air-supply of his suit seemed not enough any more, the oxygen becoming less and less with any gasped breath he took, and still, it never seemed to fill his lungs for one normal breath of air.

"Shall I call Ms. Potts, Sir?"

Jarvis voice rang in his head, echoing in the beat of his brutally pulsing heartbeat. His chest seemed to get even tighter as her image suddenly appeared on the display in front of his eyes. Call failed. Impossible to tell apart where it came from, from the speakers or his own mind. It had to be his mind, she was dead already. Blood rushed in his ears, mixing with a shrill ringing. They had to go, they would all die here, too. He would die here, Loki would die.

They were not supposed to be here. Tony felt like falling, deeper and deeper into himself.

Suddenly, there was Loki's face, returning from out of the endless nowhere all around them. His mouth was moving, but Tony could not hear him, like speaking underwater. It was hard to concentrate on him, almost impossible to claw himself back up from the panic dragging him down. When the god's lips moved again, he tried to focus on what he said, but everything was fuzzy even when he blinked and his heart was still pounding against his ribcage in an erratic rhythm.

He felt unable to connect, unable to understand what the other said, trapped in this suit, but then he recognized a word – 'Tony'. Loki was trying to reach him, the concern written all over his face. He was trying to make him go on, but he did not understand – there was nothing waiting for them when they went on, only death, nothing but certain death.

With an almost crunching grip, he grabbed Loki's his lower arms, clawing into the skin, unable to moderate his strength. A raspy, panicked breath escaped his mouth, a noise he never heard himself make, frightening and disgusting. Then the words blurted out of him, too fast to be understood, if they reached Loki at all, since there was no sound in space, no connection, but he could not stop himself.

“We have to go back... Loki, I can't...I just- We-. I can't..”

The urge to leave became stronger and his body just would not stop shaking, but Loki was not coming with him and he needed Loki to come with him, because if he would lose him now, now, that-

“It's alright Tony. You are not alone, I am here. Look at the light.”

The god's voice, clear and calm, cut through the devilish loop of racing thoughts like a knife, forcing his attention towards him with an external power that was not Tony's own. At once, the shaking stopped when his gaze dropped to watch Loki's hand, his whole body brought to a temporary freeze.

Inside of his right hand, something came into existence. A small ball of golden light, emitting warm rays like the sun, dispelling the darkness of the void and the cold light surrounding them. It was mesmerizing and Tony could not look away, felt how that warmth poured into the gridlock of his stuck mind and eased the tension there.
He could not give a name to what Loki did and he did not even think to do it, he just clung to that light with all the willpower he could still muster. Slowly, very slowly, the warmth reached his physics and he gave in only too willingly, like giving in to sleep after an emotional breakdown – you knew it would all still be there if you woke up the next morning, but it was just so sweet to get away for a few hours.

Without himself noticing it, his grip around Loki’s wrists eased a little. The god had started to move forward again, further away from the portal, keeping the light shining.

“Follow me.”

Eventually, Tony complied and let go of Loki completely to follow him into the depths of space, eyes fixed on the tiny sun in the other’s palm.

Approaching the edge the city, they passed by smaller machines and homeless meteorites floating in the vast nothingness.

Until they had reached solid rock again, everything around Tony had been fuzzy, his mind unable to relate to the outside world. The light in Loki’s hand had been the only thing he had been able to focus on, a constant reminder that he was not alone out here. It flickered to nothingness the second their feet touched ground and Loki could look at him again, but it was no longer necessary. Whatever this light had done, it had worked. Somehow.

Inside of him, it was still there: the panic that they would die, right here and now, before they would be able to do anything making worth the effort of trying. He had to fend off the impressions coming from all sides and, what was way worse, the memories they stirred up. Yet, here, in such close proximity to the great complex of machinery and stone, it was easier to get away from it. From focusing on an even breath alone, he could apply his attention to their plan now. Just that they did not have much of a plan yet.

"Where is he?"

His voice had stopped being shaky, but it still sounded croaked, as if the words refused to leave his mouth. He cleared his throat, mentally reminding himself of all those nights he had spent sleeping without nightmares and flashbacks. There was no way he would take a step back, now.

"Not here, if that's what you ask. Before we can go on, we have to destroy this city. It is powered by a-"

"- reactor on the inside, yes, my sensors are going crazy."

"Yes. Once the reactor is shut down, the Chitauri will be powerless. It is highly doubtable that, after that, there will be anything left to interpose itself between us and.. Thanos."

The analogies would not stop. After the nuke had destroyed the mothership in the first battle of New York, he had been told by others that every Chitauri’s signal had been cut in the same second, leading to numerous dead Chitauri bodies raining down on the city. If there was a similar mechanism working here with the same central controlled signals, then they knew where to strike. Even though Tony still did not see a single living being around them except the two of them. It was not exactly reassuring, though.
At least slowly, the feeling of having run for his life for hours slowly faded from his body, making his mind clearer again. A panic attack, nothing more. They could make it.

"There will surely be a defense mechanism at work. A shield or anything else magic?"

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The moment Loki entered the depths of space, everything that lied behind was forgotten within seconds, and there was only the darkness left, and what laid behind. This time, he did not experience fear. He had when he had arrived there for the first time, for he had been weak, deprived of any strength and nothing to fight for than his own miserable life. This time, he was here with a mission, with an aim. An mission he would fulfill, no matter what it would take him. Even if it meant that he would die on a place like this.

“I can not tell for sure. I have not seen this thing before, it is a new construct. Maybe they found technology in another realm they raided, or invented it themselves. The protection might be more subtle than it might suggest from the outside.”

Loki let his gaze roam over the mass of machinery towering above them, its heated glow the only source of light in near proximity. Then he discovered a turret lurking out of the mass of metal.

“Or maybe not that subtle at all.”

There was no response from Tony, who had discovered the turret as well. Then, without giving Loki a proper warning at first, he rose his palms and shoot a ray of energy that blasted the metal into pieces.

“Let’s get going, the sooner we get out of here, the better.”

Loki knew that this sudden determination was nothing but facade, and although he felt worried for his partner, he let it slip. They had other things to focus on, another battle to fight. Their last battle.

“Indeed. You take the right side, I take the left one.”

The Mark Omega was gone with a loud blasting noise, a trail of blue moving upwards, firing at the side of the giant machinery in rapid blasts. As if awakened from a long slumber, the remaining turrets lit up with violet light and moved to aim at the Iron Man. To late Loki noticed that there were too many for Tony to evade. The entire side of the city was porcupines with them, additional ones emerging from the depths of the machine. They all aimed at Tony, and no matter how fast, not matter how advanced his technology, he had no chance of dodging all of them.

Several blasts hit, and Loki had to watch in terror as Tony tumbled in the air, apparently limb and unconscious, if not dead.

Jumping off the edge of the stone he had been standing on, Loki tried to reach Tony. Several months caught in the weightless void and another several months spend on the run between the branches of Ydrrasil had taught him how to move in an environment without gravity. He felt himself almost effortlessly carried towards the city ahead, but soon he noticed that something was not alright.

But it was not enough, there were already several hundred feet separating them, but that was not his biggest problem. As if they had been just waiting for the right moment, gates opened in the machinery and Chitauri were swarming out, their hovercrafts carrying them faster than Loki could ever hope to in this void.
without gravity. They surrounded him, send him falling back with coordinated pushes every time he got too close. Loki faintly felt how shots of energy penetrated his skin, creating wounds that were closed in the next moment. Nevertheless, he did not know how much more he could endure. He was far from being in his best condition, but there was no way he could let himself be stopped like that. Not after everything they had gone through.

Another blast hit him, then another. Loki felt himself loosing orientation, in a world with no up and down, whirled around like a leave in a storm. Maybe Tony had been right, maybe it had been a foolish idea to go here, right into the awaiting arms of their enemies, serving themselves on a silver platter. Desperately, Loki’s hands reached out to cling to something, anything he could reach. He could feel something metallic under his hands, and he grasped tightly, holding onto it like a drowning rat. Somehow, the aliens energy blasts had carried him towards the city allowing him to stop his weightless tumbling. It was astonishing how a simple thing like gravity, or at least the illusion of it could suddenly hold a value.

Still, even if it meant that he was no longer a floating aim for his enemies, it did not mean that they would let him go just like that. They were still hovering in close proximity, their eyes on him, weapons pointed on his back, ready to fire again should the opportunity arise. Strangely, they did not try to attack now, although Loki could not really fathom why.

Only distantly, he heard the noise of another battle – firing turrets and the high whining noise of Tony's repulsor blasts, telling him that Tony was still alive. Anyway, Loki had to end this soon, for he did not know how long Tony could hold his own against hundreds of canons aimed at him.

Suddenly, a shiver ran through the metal under his fingers.

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There was no air in space, so there was no sound. All Tony got to see was a near silent spectacle of cannons exploding in light when they fired, the thin illuminated lines they drew over the black sky, set to the music of his own raspy breathing and his pulse hammering in his ears.

He was fast enough to dodge them, there was no air drag slowing him down and as soon as he had got used to this kind of flying, he used it to his advantage. Yet, he was robbed of one of his senses, completely relying on Jarvis to calculate and show the path of the approaching missiles. It was a fucking hectic affair and he was barely a few minutes in to know that he would not be able to maintain that kind of speed and agility for long.

It was as if the whole side of the city had come to life, the entire system changed from peaceful to state of war in a few seconds. Wherever he tried to seek a dead angle to escape the hits, there were cannons coming to life, unfolding from the mazy construction of wires and tubes.

His brain was running on high-speed, reactions almost automatic while he was trying to figure out not only to survive this, but to find a way inside – a way to destroy the reactor which was powering all of this.

When in the periphery of his vision, a gigantic ball of white light exploded and trailed off in the vast distance of space, he did not have the time to feel concerned about Loki. Whatever the god had encountered over there, he had to deal with it on his own.
Tony clenched his teeth together and flew a sharp circle, two rays of light clashing together just at the spot where he had been a second prior. There was not even the time to return the fire any longer – too many aims, too many potential causes of death for himself.

“Where do they enter? They have to get in there somewhere. I can't see a gate, not even a fucking kitty door.”

He was muttering to himself, and Jarvis did not answer, since obviously, he did not know an answer as well. Only sometimes, a concerned “Sir-” escaped him, when Tony almost missed to avoid a collision with one of the energy rays.

Without noticing, he had considerably removed himself from Loki and now was racing around the corners and edges of the other side of the city. Behind him, more and more cannons came to life where he had passed by, changing angles to follow him with their huge barrels. Right now, he was too fast to let them hit him, always a few feet further when they fired. This strategy, however, only worked until he had come full circle around the city – then, he would be fucked.

Behind all the great towers and smaller facilities of the upper city, another gigantic explosion of light reminded of the second fight that was going on.

“If there are no more hidden defense mechanisms beneath, my estimated results suggest you to fly about 200 feet further down.”

“Done.”

Like diving into a swimming pool, Tony rushed downwards, grazed by an energy beam which for a second changed the all surrounding coolness to a way too intense heat. He almost lost balance, but steadied himself again and vanished under the edge and into the darkness beneath the city.

As if it had been waiting for him to be lured into its trap, everything stirred to life down here as well. Whole batteries of smaller spring guns lit up in front of his face and the inventor's eyes widened in panic surprise. Just before he was riddled by bullets, he escaped with a bold sidestep maneuver, rushing past a metallic construction of unidentifiable purpose only inches away, silent beams of deadly light crossing right behind his boots.

“Didn't you say it was SAFE down here??!”

“I was speaking of estimated results, Sir.”

Flying with his back as close to the city's underside as possible was the best solution for now, yet it entailed hazardous zig zag paths and last-second dodging moves when suddenly another barrel appeared out of nowhere in front of him. One could almost think that it was a living organism, growing thorns and secreting poison when an enemy came too close – but at least, if he flew intelligent, he sometimes managed to make it hit itself.

Yet, he could not go on like this. He just had so much oxygen stored for this trip and his breathing was going rapidly.

A sudden square of light over his head caught his attention and he almost restrained speed.
“Jarvis, have you seen that?!!”

“It appears to be the entry to a small chamber, yet you can not use it to seek shelter. You are too 
big to fit through.”

“Rude.”, Tony dodged another burst of fire, then swerved and returned to fly past it once more,
“Where does it lead to?”

“Upwards, for 147.8 feet.”

“And then?”

“What are you up to, Sir?”

“You remember Star Wars? I always thought the destruction of the-”, another ray of light grazed 
his side, “Death Star totally unrealistic. Nobody in charge of building a thing like this is that 
stupid.”

A faint grin appeared on his face.

“At least, that’s what I thought.”

-----

As if having received an invisible command, the metal around the spot Loki was clinging to lit up 
with lights, a few at first, then more and more, turning the entire complex into a sea of small 
glowing spots.

At first, Loki thought that it was a direct defense mechanism against enemies that were to touch to 
the construct, and that he would be pierced by spikes or sucked into the machinery within the next 
second.
More out of reflex than anything else, Loki let go of the metal he had been clinging to, drifting off 
into the zero gravity space beyond the city, back towards the Chitauri.

Yet, they did not attack, but brought some distance between him and them. Loki had not time to 
wonder about their sudden receding, because something else caught his attention.
The small lights on the city had suddenly started moving...no, the entire metal was shifting, 
coiling, until suddenly, a part of the city broke loose.

Impossible to say what exactly he was seeing there at first. It was nothing but an uncoordinated 
mass of metal, shifting and buzzing as the brightly blinking parts fell into place, forming what 
looked like.

“Damn.”

His words were lost in the nothingness of space, with no one there to hear them.
What had been an indistinguishable mush of machinery a moment had suddenly grown limbs, now 
resembling something that looked like an oversized, mechanic dog. Only that this time, he could be 
sure that there was no Chitauri-monstrosity hidden inside.
The part of the thing that should have ended in a head instead formed into the long metallic shape 
of a canon – a canon with a foreboding white shine from inside.

Loki could evade being hit just in the lat second, yet even from the side he could feel the scorching 
heat of the beam, charring his clothing.
The machine moved almost effortless through the weightless space, easily maneuvering itself through something that reminded Loki a lot of Tony's trusters. It charged after the god, making even the Chitauri flew as they tried to avoid being in the line of fire, or anywhere near the creature. Loki could fathom too well why. Close proximity was enough to be scorched by the energy blasts.

The god knew that his only chance to fight this thing – what ever it was – was to get his feet back onto the ground, where he was more than just a tumbling ball. If he could lure the creature in the meteorite-field beneath he could turn the tables to his favor, using the rocks to hide and to slow down the machine.

Realizing that idea was an entirely different matter. Teleporting was out of question, it would take too much time, too much concentration that could easily cost him his life. Neither could he wait for a random energy blast to carry him downwards.

But there was still one possibility left, now as he was not surrounded by Chitauri anymore. Hands once again lit up in bright blue and creating his own energy blast. As expected, its backlash was enough to push him downwards, closer to his aim.

The machine followed close, already collecting energy for another attack. Loki just managed to reach the first meteorites and disappear behind one of them, but it did not have the desired effect. Although out of its line of sight (or however that thing was sensing him), the machine unleashed its blast with a resonating howl.

The god managed to push himself away from the floating stone before it was vaporized by the energy beam, but still, he was seized by the shockwave and made a painful collision with another meteorite.

It did not take more than a few seconds for the beast's canon-muzzle to load again, then another blast hit right into the field of meteorites, burning stone and nearby machinery away as if it was nothing but old paper.

Hiding and dodging became more and more difficult with every attack of the machine, and soon Loki had come to the conclusion that a meteorite-field was not enough to hide from a creature like that. Wherever he would go, the blast of white energy would wipe out everything – some floating rocks would not grant him safety.

No, avoidance play was not the right tactic. On the contrary – he needed to get close.

This metallic beast had no neck, it could not bend its head and it had no mind to come up with a plan different from shooting straight at whatever dared to cross its path. Loki had deducted that much from his behavior pattern until now and the way the Chitauri hurried away from it in order not to end as a casualty.

If he could only get close enough to climb its back... surely there was something vulnerable beneath all these metallic plates.

Cowering in the shadow of a larger meteorite for another second, he waited, counting three heartbeats before he ventured to summon his magic once again. Surging in his fingertips, he held it back until the power was barely enough to control any longer.

One thought, and it was set free.

A powerful blast of energy catapulted him through the airless space. He felt his shoulder collide with a smaller rock, then another, but the pain was only marginal.

Then, before he could really prepare himself for it, his back dashed against the rough cold surface of alien steel. A jolt of pain through his spine, then he was already back floating, the impetus of his magical blast too much for the distance he had to travel.
With all strength he could muster, his hands clawed in its surface, hectically trying to get a hold on
one of the edges of a metal plate or a cable to avoid floating back to space where he would be an
easy target. Thankfully, his fingers found something to scratch into and his flight was abruptly
stopped, leaving him hanging from the beasts back which movements became suddenly erratic and
hectic.
Clenching his teeth, Loki ignored that his hands were ground sore from the rough material, but
merely swung his leg up the beasts back. He had ridden beasts greater and more threatening than
this one, this would be nothing but child's play now.

From afar, he saw the Chitauri still hovering, but not attacking – now he was immune by the dog's
devastating blast.

Crawling further forward turned out as easy once he had found a good grip and a few moments
later, he had his legs slung firmly around the metallic torso and pressed his hand down at the spot
where living animals had their spine.

Magic surged through his hands, heating up the metal. Shining gray turned into glowing orange,
and Loki's arm sunk deeply into the machine's torso. The god had no idea what exactly he way
gripping, he just took hold of what he could reach and tore it out of the machine. Spark's erupted
from the spot, accompanied by the splash of molten metal. Then, all of sudden, the entire
machinery died down, it's lights extinguishing one after another.

There was no death-scream, no agonized scrambling. The machine just stopped moving, floating
helpless in the void that was the space beyond.

Just in that moment, the entire city erupted in an explosion of blinding light, the shockwave strong
enough to tear Loki's hands off the dead machine and to hurl him away.
'Tony did it' was what came into his mind, a feeling of triumph filling his chest, but then he
realized that he had already passed the last peripheral meteorite chunks, that the shockwave was
still carrying further onwards, that everything around him was starting to become nothing but
blackness again.

Soon, the afterglow of the explosion was barely visible any longer, becoming smaller and smaller
in the distance and Loki was still moving. He cursed inaudibly – there was no sign of orientation
here, nothing he could head back towards once he had lost the connection entirely.
He could see himself being lost in the void all over again, caught in eternal blackness, a world
without direction, without aim or purpose.
It would be a pathetic, almost ridiculous end for him, ending up in the nameless space within the
realms with no chance of return.

But then, out of the darkness, a blue light appeared. Coming closer and closer, Loki could soon
make out the frame of the Mark Omega, rushing towards him with incredible speed. Never in his
life, he had been happier to see this assembly of scrap metal.
The next moment, metallic arms closed around him, and with a swift movement, he was carried
back to where he had come from.

“You can't leave - we didn't even get to the fun part yet.”

The city – or machinery, whatever it had been – was nothing but a mass of floating and burning
metal when they returned. The moment it had been destroyed, the portal had collapsed as well, its
destruction far less impressive than the gigantic explosion Tony had caused. Nevertheless, it
narrowed their options.
Now, the only things left were the dark and looming shapes of far-away asteroids.
Nothing was blocking their path any longer – and Thanos was waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Haha, OMG we're so sorry xDD Canonhead-dog... what the fuck... we're out of ideas D:

Anyway, I hope you can endure this shitty chapter.... we're going to edit it tomorrow but for now we're just happy to be done.

Still, comments would be awesome!
Again, they were drifting through the weightless depths, only that this time it was him who had brought back the other. He had no idea where Loki was leading him, but he seemed to know the way.
Impossible to tell how long it took them, there was no feeling of time and the digits on his clock displaying in his HUD were just meaningless numbers here. A cold and distant haze was the only thing that illuminated the space in front of them, and he could not tell from where that light came from, either.
In front of them, dark, almost mountain-like shapes of the meteorites where the only landmarks that gave away the distance they covered. It was only a faint notion, but Loki seemed to be heading to the highest of them. Even with nothing around as a reference value, the massive clustering of those black rocks was intimidating.
They were coming closer and closer and the inventor could almost taste it: the promise of a battle that was long overdue.
He wondered about the certainty with which the god moved, considering the fact that he had been in a very bad shape last time he had been dragged through this endless void. There was a calmness in Loki’s face every time he could catch a glimpse of it, despite the exhaustion he had to feel - a calmness he could not quite share.
Yet, he was more than willing to contract that calmness from him. It did not quite work, though.
Although they were still miles away, there was something changing in the atmosphere - or, lack of atmosphere - around them. Covered by his suit, it did not affect him directly, but it was still strong enough to leave a funny feeling in his guts.
Maybe it was just the fear making itself felt, but it was a different feeling, though. Something external.
Neither of them uttered a single word as they closed in onto the meteorite-field, now able to make out more than the rough shape of the enormous stones. They were of peculiar shapes and Tony wondered what forces were at work out here, which catastrophes of gigantic extents happened here everyday without ever reaching the human measuring devices. It was a nice distraction, since Loki was obviously not in for a talk.
The god had been silent since he had caught him after the explosion of the Chitauri city and Tony failed to imagine what could be going on in his head. Somehow, he did not ask, contrary to his usual nature. It felt not like the place for light conversation – or any conversation at all.
Eventually, they reached the first meteorites where Tony dropped Loki onto the solid ground carefully, before he landed himself. Taking a short look around, he could not make out anything around them that seemed to be a threat.
His gaze lingered a while longer on the foot of stairs, carved directly out of the stone and leading up so high that he could not even make out what was on top of them.
He would not have been surprised to find blinking arrows pointing in the right direction.
The strange feeling had not become worse, just settled as a general condition inside of him, leaving him at unease. His body felt heavier, though, like a weight was pressing down on him and for a moment he was confused about the origin of this feeling, until his thoughts were interrupted when
Loki suddenly said something very surprising.

“There is air.”

“That doesn't make any sense. Where does it come from?”
Tony frowned sceptically, his gaze dropping at the calculations Jarvis was running without needing an extra invitation. The scientist within him protested violently, but it matched: He was not floating off to nowhere any longer, so there was some kind of gravity, too.

Still, he felt almost personally offended when Jarvis announced that Loki was actually right.

Not hiding his skepticism from his features, he let his face-plate snap up and looked at the other.

The concern flashing over Loki’s face as soon as he was able to look at him again was telling Tony that obviously, he looked as bad as he felt. He might not have been injured, at least not severely, but the panic brooding just beneath the surface of his forced coolness was real.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then Loki’s gaze shifted upwards to where the stairs would lead them to.

“It's time. Let us go.”

With these words, Loki turned away entirely and started walking. Tony followed quietly, until they had both reached the stairs that would lead them upwards, towards their enemy.

If he was honest with himself, Tony did not know what he had expected, but certainly not this.

Nothing of this was even remotely comparable to anything he had ever seen. The sheer endless steps leading further up, towards an aim they both knew of but which was still only a vague idea in the inventor's head. He was counting the steps while he walked, unconsciously, trying to calm himself somewhat. Being able to breath freely again was comforting, yet it stirred a deeply rooted suspiciousness within him.

Why should there be oxygen here? It made no sense at all, it was impossible to explain as a cosmic anomaly, it was physically impossible. Yet, Tony had seen a lot of physically impossible things during the last year which had always been explained with one simple word: magic. Magic which was almost always worked by an entity of any kind whatsoever - meaning it was intentional.

Meaning - Thanos knew they were here. He was expecting them.

This did not come as that much of a surprise, given the fact that they had just blown up one of his floating Chitauri cities with a boom visible from here to Mars, probably. Yet, he did not like the taste of it, of being granted permission to face the titan so that he could punish them right at his feet. It sent a shudder down his spine and fueled his perspiration, he could already feel his t-shirt stick at his back.

The feeling of running deeper and deeper into an invisible trap became more and more persistent with every further step he took. Nervously glancing at Loki’s back every few seconds, he was that close to verbalizing his doubts, but he did not.

It would not change anything. If Thanos knew they were here, he would not let them go again just because they had not directly attacked him yet. They would climb these stairs up to the very top and face what was waiting there for them, whatever it would be.

Around them, weightless meteorites hovered eerily in the nothingness, some of them crowded together in tight groups, a dim, strange white light emitting from their inside. The whole way was lit like this, even the massive stairs made of a shining, sleek black rock were illuminated by that
white cold light. Beneath the stairs was nothing but the abyss, all blackness around them, and when Tony dared to look to the side and not focus his gaze on the moving muscles under Loki's shirt any longer, he stared into what he imagined pure loneliness felt like.

Any being dwelling here, voluntarily, all day and night - although here, the concept of time itself became irrelevant - had to be mad. Or, would eventually go mad if it stayed long enough.

At the height of step 153, it suddenly became worse.
It took him a moment to figure out what it was that caused him this ineffable feeling of unease, so much more intense than what he had been experiencing all the time before. When he looked beyond the back of Loki's head however and saw that there were not a lot of steps left, he knew what it was.

Just his presence alone made him feel physically sick, like he was about to vomit after seeing something too disturbing for his mind to deal with. Just his presence alone, before he had even seen him in person, made his knees go weak. He hated that guy already.

Only ten steps now. Loki was not slowing down for any kind of review or strategic conversation, he just moved on with a somnambulant certainty and the genius followed. His heart had started racing again and when he licked his lips, they tasted salty. In the distance, a shadow broke the sterile glow of the white light, a large shadow, unmoving - waiting.

Straightening his posture and clenching his teeth, he put on the best mask he had to offer. There was a lot of effort to maintain this facade and control his features when he was finally able to glimpse over the edge of the plateau they had reached, because what he saw there was easily stuff to make nightmares of.

A throne, higher than a person and carved into a giant rock, towered over them - he had to lay his head in his neck when he wanted to see the top of it. In the same time brute and of magnificent beauty, ornaments were engraved in it, telling stories in languages he would never be able to learn.

Sitting on it, was a being he could not describe as a person anymore.

Thanos was completely alone, yet his overwhelming presence filled the whole area with the surging assertion of undeniable power. He was big, bigger than the Hulk, a mountain of muscles and hard, impenetrable flesh.
Yet, it was not his body that let Tony feel small and petty - the gigantic fists that could easily crush him and his suit inclusive, the crude landscape which was his abominable face with its protruding chin and the dangerously glaring eyes or the golden armor, covering only few parts of his body and indicating that he was not in need to wear any armor at all - no, it was the sound that came from deep within the titan's chest.
A vibrating, dark chuckle, a sound so deep that it gave him a headache and so sinister that he just knew that they had come to the wrongest possible place in the universe.
"Look what we got here... The godling who thinks that his laughable efforts will bring him a hint of glory - and a nameless piece of human scum. I must say that you brought me nice amusement the time it took you to get here."

Upon hearing those words, whatever voice they were spoken by and whoever was owner of that voice, something changed inside of Tony. Where Thanos' aura had made him feel weak and vulnerable, at the mercy of a force he was unable to compete with, the content of these sayings were only too familiar to him.
This was nothing but the rhetoric of a tyrant, the words of somebody in power, too blind to recognize potential of a different kind than his own. He had fought tyrants before - and he had
killed tyrants before. They were all the same.

As the cold feeling of dread faded from his chest, he felt anger boiling up inside of him. Righteous anger against finally, finally the person whom he could declare guilty without a second thought and who was not even ashamed of it, but felt elated by his own barbarism. Where killing Chitauri soldier after Chitauri soldier had not brought him satisfaction, this would be his revenge. Killing Thanos would seal it:
It would be the last act of the life which had gone so terribly downhill – and the first act of a life beyond anything he had ever imagined.

When Thanos went on, the words did not fear him any longer. The time for fear was over.

"Tell me: How do you want to die?"

-----

The mass that was Thanos' body started moving, slowly rising from his enormous throne. Loki could feel the shift of energy in the air, could almost grasp it with his bare hands. As if the whole atmosphere around them was moving around him, flowing towards Thanos and gathering around his massive body, at his service.

The god knew only vaguely of the Mad Titan's power, but legends said that he held the ability to draw power from the cosmos itself – whatever that meant. Having the power of the Tesseract on their side was enough to compensate for such a power, but most likely not enough for them to be in advance.

Fate would decide how this battle had to end.

At his side, Loki could hear how Tony's faceplate snapped shut and the repulsors lit up in anticipation of an attack, electric blue light radiating from them. This was the sign. The magic slumbering in Loki came alive as well, engulfing his arms from the tip of his fingers up to his elbows in that all consuming blue fire.
He felt the flames lick on his skin, felt the warmth of them and at the same time how they sucked on his reserves, drying him out. It would be the last time he would ever make use of the Tesseract's power – no matter how this fight would end today.

It all would be decided now.

Neither of them deemed Thanos' question worthy of an answer, there was no patience left for this kind of aimless talking. Loki was the first one to attack, not waiting for a start signal.
Erupting from inside of him, he sent his magic right after Thanos, the same spell that had so easily torn apart his malformed little pet, 'the Other', back in the city of Los Angeles.
This time, however, his spell did not even reach its aim. Like a dull hit against his head, he felt his own magic collide with what seemed to be an impenetrable wall of other energy instead.

During the first seconds, Loki thought that he could fight it, even break through. He closed his eyes, concentrated what he had on the magic, but then, it suddenly slipped out of his control.
Before he knew what happened, his own spell backfired at him and with a scream Loki went down, blood gushing out of his own mouth.

“Loki!”

“Stay away!”

The god waved Tony rudely off, who had attempted to come to his aid. As quickly as possible, he
scrambled back onto his feed, wiping away the blood dripping from his chin with the back of his hand. The wound inside his head had already been closed again, but Loki could still feel the echo of pain resonating through his brain.

Even though the mortal complied quickly, one look at Thanos told him that it was already too late. The titan had seen the concern in the other's eyes and had just discovered their weakness and Loki was sure that he would not hold back to use it for his advantage.

Still, his attention seemed to be on him alone.

“One could expect that the use of a weapon like the Tesseract might have finally given you some worth, but it seems even those powers are wasted on you.”

From out of nowhere, Loki felt how something invisible engulfed him, squeezing down on him with a crushing force. His eyes went wide when he realized that he could not breathe, not move any longer.

All the power within him unable to reveal itself, crushed to a small nothingness within him. The blue light on his arms flickered out while he desperately tried to shake off the foreign, too powerful magic that was holding him down.

It was useless, the intensity was overwhelming him and where the Tesseract's magic had seemed as a worthy opponent against Thanos' cosmic powers, he felt betrayed by it now. Already, he was tasting blood, felt how small blood vessels gave in to the pressure which soon would crush his body like a ripe fruit. His vision stared to blur.

As if from far away, he heard footsteps were coming closer, slowly paced. Loki's panic increased, he felt his breath quicken. No, no this was too early! There had not even been a chance to fight a real fight. He could not die like this!

A buzzing from the side, then the rushing sound of the Mark Omega's thrusters interrupted the noise of his own labored breathing. Only from the edge of his vision, Loki saw how a rain of missiles went down on the titan, before they exploded in a sea of fire.

Even though it was nothing but a slight distraction, it was enough to break Thanos' concentration for a short moment. Loki's power poured back into him, filling him with new hope - he would live. The interruption enabled him to shake off the spell and get back to his feed, no matter how much his body protested.

In the same moment he rose form the floor, he yanked up a magic shield around himself, ready for the next attack.

The titan had not even been grazed by the fire and Loki was forced to watch as the flying suit was hit and whirled against the sharp rocks of the meteorites with a single wipe of magic. The sound of Tony's pained groan when he landed sounded horrible even through the speakers and for a few seconds, Loki was frozen to the spot as he stared in horror.

No, he had to shake it off, any overtly shown compassion would be to their disadvantage. They both knew that their death was a calculated risk... they had no time to look out for the other.

Quickly, he regained his composure, facing Thanos again. Channeling his own magic, he jolted forward, this time attacking the giant directly.

Again, it was not enough – he did not make it close enough to even touch the Titan. A bolt of violet energy hit him, burning him and surging through his entire body like a wildfire. Just like Tony before, Loki was hurled away and painfully crashed against the rocks.

His magic immediately worked to repair the damage, but he did not know how long he could keep this up...or heal himself fast enough before he lost too much blood. The titan's powers were beyond anything he had fought against in his entire life.
Where Tony and he were already on very limit of their powers, Thanos' movements were not only effortless, but relaxed. Even their combined powers were useless, a pathetic display against this invisible wall behind which the titan was still ungrazed. The colossus had barely been moving the entire time, just now and then lifting his hand in a vague gesture which had resulted in an energy blast strong enough to toss them around like dry leaves. Like a puppet master, he was playing with them. However he did it, their attacks never came as a surprise for him, Thanos always knew how to counter them without getting his hands dirty.

No, there had to be a way!

Gaining momentum, Loki ran towards the titan, focusing all of his magic to pierce through the wall, just a small hole for him to jump through. He would personally scratch those small red eyes out of this gigantic skull with his bare hands, if he just came close enough!

He jumped, but once again Loki was flung against the rocks, his back arching in a painful way. An agonized scream left his mouth as the sharp stone bore into his skin. He needed some time to regain his composure, yet he knew that he could not rest for too long. Thanos was closing the distance to the god on the ground, his movements still slow, sure that Loki would not have the strength to run away. He probably was right: even lifting his upper body sent a jolt of pain through his entire back. Yet, when he looked at the approaching titan, a movement at the side caught his attention.

As slow and as possible, Tony was coming to his feet again, trying not to attract the titans attention. Loki's mind operated quickly: It could work like this. As long as Thanos was distracted by Loki, there might be a chance to find a loophole in the shield... Not paying attention to what happened at his side, Thanos had started talking again, his mocking words directed at Loki alone.

"You have hidden the Tesseract well, I see, but not well enough to keep it from me. She seeks power, always looking for a worthy wielder of her energy - what you got is just a hint. And you still think you can defeat me! Rightfully, she belongs to me and I will tear her from your pretentious magic, I will rip apart your mind and your body until I've found her. Maybe then, I will grant you the permission to die."

Loki had risen to his feet again, his glare directed at Thanos' eyes, unafraid to meet the red stare. He held back with any attack, and kept his magic quiet now, subdued and subtle. Sending a trace of hidden magic around the shield, he searched for the weakest spot, tearing at it tentatively. He was weak on his legs and the searching work of his magic demanding all of his attention. If Thanos should decide to attack now, he would be an easy aim, but he kept waiting, turning himself into a bait while Tony prepared his attack.

"I do not longer answer the verbiage of a madman."

The god's voice was cold, not giving away any emotions at all, but he could not have said anything which would hurt the giant titan in any way. Loki was playing for time, the only reason he would ever slow down his violent fighting for. Tony was behind Thanos now, Loki could see him, but his eyes never wandered over to him - he would not give away his position. He was waiting for the other to attack, and Tony was keen to take this opportunity.

Another two almost soundless steps, then the mortal took a short run-up and rushed into the air, aiming directly at the titan's exposed back, trusting in whatever Loki would help him with.

When Tony was at full speed, Loki made his move. Where he had been only tugging gently before,
his magic now tore with all power on the invisible shield. He could almost hear its ripping sound when he broke it.
The mortal rushed through the hole Loki had managed to arrange, then he reached Thanos. His repulsors lit up and fired, light-blue energy meeting the thick purplish skin of the giants verrucous back. A feeling of triumph flared up inside of the god when he smelled the stench of burning skin, but then, one of the titan's hands reached around his back and Tony was picked out of the air like a nasty flea.

A dry crack resonated through the air as the grip around Tony's lower arm was tightened, breaking the limb without effort. Loki's breath stopped, but there was no reaction from Tony, every scream cut off when he was hurled aside. His body hit the ground unprepared, and for a moment he was not moving at all, blood soaking the armor around his arm.

“Tony!”

His yell never got an answer.

Loki’s attention was drawn to the mortal on the ground a second too long. He did barely foresee the sudden attack that hit him in the side, tearing a deep wound into his flesh. Again he hit the rocks, and again his magic worked to repair the damage, yet he felt his strength leaving him with every spell he had to cast and every wound he had to regenerate.

“Your healing tricks won't help you. You'd be dead by now, if I wanted you to.”

Thanos was still almost unharmed, even though Tony's attack had hit him directly in the back, probably strong enough to tear apart almost every other living being, but the Titan's rough skin was only scorched on it's surface, the wound not even deep enough to reach any living tissue.

Loki had to admit: He was at a loss of what to do, how to act.

In retrospection, this expectation was nothing but foolish, almost suicidal. Panic filled him, his nervous gaze flickering from Tony, defeated on the ground, and Thanos towering above him. His partner could not help him now, his arm was shattered and he was regaining consciousness only slowly.

Loki's own attacks were as ineffective as the swipe of a kitten. Thanos was right: He would be dead by now, if the Titan had wanted to kill him.

Still, he could not allow himself to give up, to submit to his fate and let himself be killed. There was too much at stake for him, for everyone. Loki had to remind himself what he was fighting for. Channeling his attention inwards, he regained control over his rapid breathing and his shaking body.

He was not fighting for himself, but for his home. He fought for the existence of the Nine Realms – which would be wiped out if he lost this fight.

With all grace he could muster, he straightened his posture, forcing his aching back into a vertical position and taking a deep breath to dampen the pain in his body. He would end this, alone, if necessary.

This time, it took a lot of his willpower to summon the Tesseract's magic. It was there, whirling
inside of him, but the weaker he got, the harder it became to control it. Eventually, though, the cube
complied to him and let its magic be formed to something greater, far greater than what he had
created until now.
Rising from mid-air, a flame coiled and flickered into being, growing larger and larger, until it was
a roaring storm of blue fire, racing towards the titan and drowning him in its heat.
Sparks flew in all directions and a crackling noise filled the air when the firestorm crashed against
the protecting wall, an inferno of light.
Loki felt the Tesseract's heat eating away at his insides, but he held the spell, summoning more and
more fire, melting the ground beneath. Just a bit longer and it would break, it had to break sooner
or later, it just had to.
Without warning, the resistance suddenly vanished.
Loki stumbled forward into the sudden vacuum caused, then, Thanos' magic shield was shattered
in a raging shockwave, which almost blew the god over. He managed to stay grounded and did not
let himself be whirled away by its force, keeping up the spell.
He had to use the opportunity. Now was a rare moment in which the enemy was unprotected and
he had to inflict as much damage as possible.
Even a Titan could not withstand a firestorm like this unharmed - not even Thanos.
He saw nothing of the giant frame any longer, it had vanished completely in the raging flames. For
a short moment, Loki thought that he had done it, that his fire had been strong enough to burn away
the purplish mass of flesh and thick bone. Maybe, the battle was over now.
What happened next came entirely unexpected.
Above the noise of the fire, he heard the thundering footsteps way too late. The moment he noticed
them, Thanos already broke through the flames where he had charred his skin, but also hidden
from Loki's view.
With an agility no one would attribute to a gigantic body like this, a hand swiped for Loki,
attempting to get a hold of him.
Loki evaded the attack in the last moment – it would have killed him, he knew for sure – but it was
not enough to dodge Thanos second fist, engulfed by purplish light. It hit him in the chest, and he
felt his sternum being pressed inside, his ribs breaking and the foreign magic surging through his
entire body.
Like a limp puppet he was hurled away, crashing against the sharp edges of nearby rocks, his
splashing blood painting them red immediately.
Loki fell to the ground, coughing and struggling for air, his vision blurred and painted red. His
mouth was filled with his own blood, and he felt his heart painfully convulse inside of his chest,
stopped shortly before continuing to beat in a hectic rhythm.
The pain was unbearable for his mind and only faintly he realized how his body became heavy and
slow while his consciousness started to shut down to spare him the agony. His eyes fell shut as his
thoughts drifted off and became sluggish and hazy.
Loki was tempted. It would have been so easy, to lie here like this, feeling his soul slipping away
while his body slowly bled out on the ground.
No more pain, no more thoughts - just blissful darkness. It seemed so alluring, tempting to give in.
His heart would just stop beating, and everything would be over.
A loud, panicked scream brought his mind back into reality faster than a bucket of cold water to
the face.
Tony.

Tony was still there, and he too would be killed if Loki would give up just like that.

Loki opened his eyes, the simple action already and effort in itself. Vision still blurry at first, he could make out the Mark Omega a little bit further away, flying uncoordinated and just barely avoiding the attacks Thanos sent after him. Even from here, Loki could see the the other's arm hanging from his body awkwardly, the dark metal painted red with blood.

Another noise mixed into his head, but this one did not come from outside. A faint whispering, nothing more, the words indistinguishable, but Loki knew where they came from. The Tesseract was calling him, offering up her last energy. There was still enough of it, barely enough, stored deep within the core of Loki's magic for only one purpose.

To kill Thanos.

His rips snapped back into place, the last healing spell he could afford. Movements slow, but determined, the god got back on his feet. Scrambling forward ungracefully and supported by his hands at first, he eventually managed to get halfway up, using his own knees as brace for his hands.

His breathing was going ragged, he could still taste blood – it was dripping from his forehead where he had hit the ground, was running from his nose and mouth – and his clothing hung in tattered shreds from his frame.

He did not care about any of this.

The only thing he cared about was the creature in front of him, and the fire inside his body. A fire that screamed to be released, to kill everything in its path with not restraint. Where had been a void of darkness before, there now was heat, pure energy, endless power - and it was his alone.

Nothing would stop him now.

Thanos had noticed the movement from the edge of his vision, and let off from playing with the wounded human, turning back to Loki behind him. His mouth turned into a malicious grin when he caught sight of his condition.

"Are you serious, little god? Do you think your efforts will gain you anything? Look at you. You are merely vermin, crawling at my feed, dependent on the aid of even weaker mortals. I will have you dead on the ground where you belong. And when you're dead, I will rip off every limb of your mortal. You are no match for me. You are worthless, and I will tear you apart!"

The titan's last words were a roar, loud and powerful, making the ground beneath Loki's feet quiver with its intensity. Another man would have despaired in front of the Titan, begged him for mercy, blinded by his overwhelming strength alone.

Loki could feel it, too, surging through the air, filling the space with its presence. Thanos was a beast that had unmade entire realms, had slaughtered races without mercy – no matter how strong they had been – and his name was enough to make even the most powerful men and women of Asgard shiver with fear.

Still, it was nothing in comparison to the blue fire of the Tesseract burning in his core.

With one fluid movement Loki rose to his full height, staring Thanos in the face. A wide, wolfish
grin spread over his face, then, a chuckle forced its way up from his chest and out between his lips. His chuckle grew to laughter, unrestrained and wild, uncaring that his life could be ended in a matter of seconds.

"You want to tear me apart? Do you even know who I am?!"

His laughing ceased and he straightened his posture, then Loki took a step forward. He wanted to be heard with what he was about to say.

"I am Loki, God of Fire and Chaos, the Trickster and Liesmith! I am Mother of Sleipnir, the King of all horses, Father of Hel, the Goddess of Death, of Fenrir, the Suneating Wolf and Jormungandr, the Serpent that encompasses the Earth! I am the wielder of the Tesseract and Bringer of Ragnarok! And I will not fall through the hand of a beast like you!"

His words echoed through the vast nothingness, but Loki did not even wait long enough for this echo to cease.

A wave of heat ran through Loki's body, the cosmic fire boiling inside of him, seething stronger and stronger, starting to burn its way outside in an inferno of blue flames. The next second, his hands lit up in a scorching blue, blinding to just look at it. The heat was all-engulfing, smoldering. Loki could smell how his own clothing was slowly being charred off his skin, how the air heated up around him with the heat of the Tesseract's fire, greedy for death. His own skin was burning, too, but he did not perceive any pain.

It did not need another second of thoughts, there was no moment of hesitation.

Loki's legs began moving, faster and faster, and before the titan could scream any more spiteful words at him, he was already right in front of his towering frame. The god evaded a swipe for his head that could have easily broken his skull. Cosmic energy, summoned by the titan, was tearing at his body, ripping wounds into his already battered and beaten frame, wounds that were no longer healed by magic.

It did not stop Loki either.

One well-aimed jump, and he was at the height of Thanos' chest.

Like hot knives, his fingers dug into the titan's chest, burning through skin and muscles, melting away bones as if they were nothing but ice in an firestorm. Deep inside the broad chest, Loki's hands found their aim in form of a pulsing muscle, its beating turning fluttery when he clawed his fingers into the organ.

He barely heard the titan's scream, nor did he notice the purplish blood splashing in his face. Never before had anyone ever dared to attack the Thanos in this way, nobody had possessed the strength and ability to tear a wound like this. Still, the only thing Loki could think of was that he had found his aim - and that he could not let go off it now.

A giant hand closed around his chest and started pulling violently, squeezing harder in a vain attempt to remove Loki's grip on the desperately pulsing heart. Loki's ribs were the first that broke under the pressure, snapping like old twigs. Then his spine was crushed, and he felt how his legs went limp, how the Tesseract's fire spluttered out of the broken construct that was his body. The grip around his chest got tighter and tighter, trying to squeeze the life out of him.
Loki did not care. There was no pain in the universe that would make him let go now.

His nose and mouth were filled with the stench of the titan's scorched flesh and blood, his mind perceiving nothing but the noise of his roaring enemy and the pulsing sound of the organ in his hands.
When the pain got too much, Loki's own mouth opened in a feral scream. His grip tightened, dug deeper into the other's heart, clawing and ripping through everything he could get a hold of, the Tesseract's fire eating away at the titan's insides, mercilessly.

When Thanos eventually managed to tear Loki out of his body and toss him away, the pulsing muscle was still tightly clutched in his hands.

His limp, broken body crashed onto the sharp, hard rocks beneath. Somewhere in the distance, Tony was screaming his name, but Loki's attention was on the beating heart – a fat, purplish thing, spluttering out more blood with every cramping beat.

A dry chuckle escaped him, quickly silenced as his whole body convulsed painfully and thick blood oozed out of his own mouth. With the last remaining strength left inside of him, his fingers tightened one last time on the marred flesh of his enemy - then he tore the already ruined organ apart, painting every stone with the last blood of his enemy.

Loki's hands let go of the sullied flesh and feebly dropped to the ground. His head soon followed, a dull thud when it hit the stone. Again, his vision turned blurry, his mind already drifting off into a hazy, gray fog.
He barely felt the violent cramps and shivers of his own body, the pain of his wounds, the all-engulfing heat inside of him that rapidly burned away every remaining trace of life.

He had done it.

He had killed Thanos, because not even the lover of Death herself would survive having his heart ripped out and torn into pieces. Everything would be fine, even though Loki knew that it would not be his to see.
But Tony was alive, and Tony would get to see what he could no longer see.

He had done it.

It was over.

-----

Tony's face-plate opened almost on its own accord and he was gasping for air, his throat sore from yelling Loki's name. Still, even what he saw now, he could not believe. There was just one word resounding in his head over and over and over: No.

No, no, no, no, no.

This could not be the price for it!

There were no other thoughts in his head right now, no feeling of triumph over Thanos' defeat - just panic, driving panic that replaced everything else. Although his giant frame was immense, Tony did not see how Thanos fell on his knees, but was still able to steady himself before he fell
completely. Single-minded, his attention was completely absorbed by the god's unmoving body after his ribcage had been crushed.

He had to get to Loki, he had to bring him out of here as fast as possible. He did not think about the where, because there was no where any longer since the portal had collapsed. The only thing important was to bring him somewhere safe, away from this place.

His eyes fixated on the deformed mess of Loki's body on the floor, Tony made an attempt to scramble to his feet again. His exhaustion was blown away, all the wounds and injuries he suffered from himself were negligible. Soaring pain blinded his vision when he accidentally tried to support his body on his broken arm, and he came to a forced halt, breathing heavily with widened eyes, before he pulled himself together again.

Stumbling at first, then running, he crossed the stony area, his eyes fixated on Loki all the time with a delirious intensity, pleading inwardly that he would be okay somehow, miraculously, even though he did not believe in miracles.

Loki was not moving any longer, yet something was happening with his body which Tony could not make out from where he was. He was flickering, buzzing like a parasitic image and somehow glowing blue, brightly blue.
The inventor's chest tightened in a sudden moment of realization, because he knew that glow and deep inside of him, he knew that, for Loki, it was worse than every wound inflicted by some external force. He was almost there, just a few more feet.

Then, at his side, a loud roar shook the ground.

His chest an open wound, flesh and single veins hanging loosely from the hole Loki's hands had torn, Thanos rose to his feet again.

Stolid, slowly - but alive. Tony almost tumbled and abruptly stopped, witnessing with his mouth open how the titan first set one foot on the ground again, then the other. He roared again, a sound boring its way deep in Tony's bones, echoing in his ears even after it had faded away again. The veins and muscles of the mammoth body bulged under the purple skin and around him, the air started to shimmer with a portentous heat.

As one of his huge hands reached out for Loki, Tony's frozen frame came to life again.

Diving right in between the god and the titan, he came to a slithering halt on the black rock, yanked his hands in front of his face and fired from both repulsors. The blast hit Thanos right in his face, singeing his ugly features and causing the skin to blister. Tony held on as long as he could, wanting to burn away his entire visage.

Only when he would see his skull he could be satisfied - only then, the titan would be dead.

However, the other was stronger, stronger than anything he had ever imagined possible. Uttering a guttural bellow, he did not even try to evade the burning hot energy ray, but formed his hand to a fist and bashed it right into Tony's stomach.
He had not seen that coming. All the lights went out for a moment and he was hurled backwards, brutally crashing to the ground. It took a few seconds to find his breath again, the pain in his abdominal region making his head dizzy.

On his stomach, he felt the dented metal of the suit slice his skin there, bruising the vulnerable flesh beneath. Yet, he could not stay on the ground now, one blow would not hold him back. Coughing, he tasted blood on his tongue, but crawled forward again anyway, coming to his feet in an act of pure willpower.
It felt like he was only dragging his body along with himself, a useless weight that slowed him down.

Right in front of him, Thanos was going for Loki again, his movements slowed down, but of a savage brutality.
The giant hand closed around Loki's battered upper body, lifting him from the ground. Tony already saw what would happen next in front of his inner eye, could see Thanos tearing apart the god's body as if he would find the Tesseract inside, or crush him on the ground to satisfy his wrath. He could not let that happen.

"HEY!!"

His hoarse yell was a desperate attempt to get the titan's attention and hold him back from whatever he was going to do, but it worked just long enough. His thrusters started, taking him in the air, rushing straight towards Thanos.
He did not slow down before he got to him, his metal clad body collided directly with the giant's head. Holding on with all the strength he could still muster, he clawed into the helmet, his chestplate right at the titan's face.

Now was the moment - now, or they would both be dead.

"Jarvis, the unibeam - put all remaining power into it! NOW!!"

The mountain of muscles beneath him moved, he felt how Thanos hurled Loki's limp body aside to grab him and tear him off, but it was too late. Tony clenched his eyes not to be blinded by the light when the uni-beam got off.
A pure, white ray of light blasted away the titan's head, burning right through his skull and helmet, impossible to stop. No scream, no erratic movements, just the stench of burned flesh and the ear-shattering noise of shredding meat and bone, brain and metal.

When it suddenly stopped, Tony was momentarily deaf.
His ears were ringing and he halted his breath, feeling like he was falling apart himself any moment. It was completely silent.

Then, slowly, the headless titan started to sway - forward, backward, until the corpse overbalanced backwards and went down with a thundering crash. From then on, he was not moving any longer. Dark smoke ascended from what was left of his head.

Thanos was dead.

Tony fell to the side and on his back, the aching pain too much to bear for a moment. He moaned in pain, yet there was still no time to rest. It was not over yet, not over. He had to reach Loki, he had to bring him home.
For one time, he had to be stronger than a god.

Not a single second he believed he could be dead - it was just not an option.

Rolling on his stomach again, he gathered his remaining strength to get on all fours. Jarvis was saying something about 'emergency reserves' and 'reducing to basic functionality', but he did not listen or answer. Thanos corpse behind him was not worthy to waste another look on, once again his searching gaze found its aim in Loki's motionless frame in front of him. When he got up another time, his knees were so weak that they almost gave in the second he put weight on them and he barely made the few feet towards the god.
As soon as he reached him, his legs gave way and he tumbled ungracefully, dropping on his knees
in front of Loki. Around him, the suit disassembled, falling to the ground at his sides.

"Loki!"

The name was barely more than a gasp from his mouth, his breath hurting every time he inhaled. Still, his shaking hands found their way to the god's body, avoiding the glowing blue parts of his skin, to roll him over to see his face.

His eyes widened at what he saw, then he had to press his lips together not to utter a sound that would give away his shock. There was barely anything left of Loki. Finally released, the Tesseract's power had burst out of him and destroyed most of the physical shell. The god's arms were ripped open, still engulfed by the glowing blue, the dashes deep enough to tear flesh off bone. Inside of his ribcage, the bright blue was burning, flickering under the skin still covering it. Silently, without crackling or sizzling, it was actively scorching the flesh between his ribs, blazing smoldering holes in his chest.

Yet, his face was the worst of all. Where had been the socket of his left eye, there was nothing left but a glowing mess of the blueish energy that had burst out of him. There was a strange blue liquid running down his cheeks and dripping off his shin, mixing with the red blood.

This was what the Tesseract did – this was the prize to pay.

The eye that could still see was covered by an opaque haze – Loki was barely there any more. Yet, his gaze cleared up for a second when he felt Tony's hands on his body and he looked up to him until their eyes met.

“I'm sorry...”, he rasped out, lifting his arm to touch Tony, but then refraining from it mid-movement.

“It seems...I...I have expired my use.”

Held together by shock and stress, these words finally broke Tony. It was the truth, they both knew it. Loki's body was wrecked, beyond repair, the last bit of magic dripping out of him. The Tesseract had not left much behind as she had burned her way out of him, enabling him to lethally wound an enemy no one had been able to hurt for eons.

Tony wished he had not.

"I-I'm sorry...", Loki muttered again, his remaining eye fixed on Tony, a tear running down his check.

"No, No, no. Don't be.. You don't need to- ... just don't die on me, don't! I fucking dare you- You-... I.."

The words left his mouth in no useful order, shaky and raw as was his whole body. Tony shook his head jerkily, prohibiting Loki from going where he could not follow yet, a gesture born from the sheer impossibility to accept the obvious.

Only when his vision blurred, he noticed that tears were streaming from his eyes. No sobbing, just tears, running down his cheek and dripping from his chin.

His hands were still on Loki, fumbling for something to grip tightly, as if it could keep him here. As if he would stay with him if he clawed into him with enough force. His mouth was opening and closing without anything coming out of it any longer.

This had never been the plan.
Either both of them or nobody, but not just one. It was not fair, just not fair!

There was nothing left if Loki died. Loki had not been the card he had staked everything on - he had been the only card left in his deck.

Tony felt something tighten within him, the fear was choking him, making his movements erratic and aimless. One hand loosened from the god's shirt to cup his cheek, wiping away the tear there, feeling the heat boiling beneath Loki’s flesh, a heat that was not his own.

If he had just torn that thing out of him earlier! But it was too late now, too late and there was nothing he could do.

He wanted to scream at the same time he wanted to cry, or just die right here with Loki if that was what it would come down to. Yet, the only words blurring from his mouth were what made out his biggest fear, the only thing he could not live with.

"Don't leave me alone..!"

Loki needed longer to answer this time, the words seemed not to reach him any more. He was fading. At that realization, a violent shudder ran through Tony and a tortured sound left his throat. Impulsively, his hands clawed into the other's body, holding on as long as he could.

“I'm weak, Tony... I can't.”

The words barely reached his ears any longer, Loki's faint voice drowned by the blood rushing in his ears. There was no way of holding back the tears now, his cheeks were wet with them, their salty taste on his lips, but he did not care.

He cared about nothing anymore, just let himself be consumed by the pain of losing the only person important. Again.

Tony almost let it slip when Loki’s gaze shifted to the side, looking at the Mark Omega. He gave the machine a faint nod and before Tony knew what was happening, the metal closed around his body once again.

When he realized what Loki was about to do, his grief was pierced by panic again.

“NO! Loki, stop!!”

His words were cut off by the closing face-plate, the only one hearing his frantic yelling was himself now. Struggling and fighting against it was useless, but he could not let that happen. He would not go without Loki. Leaving him here, in the nothingness, to die. Never!

“LOKI!!”

There was a sad smile on the other's face, almost breaking at its edges, then the god placed his glowing hand on the dark chest-plate.

Tony grabbed it with his remaining hand ready to yank it off, but then he already felt it. His wide, fearful eyes met Loki's one last time. He was still smiling.

“I love you, Tony.”

Mercilessly, the teleportation spell dragged him backwards, pulling him into the space between the worlds.

Chapter End Notes
...we're sorry.

Please don't kill us.
We cried as well while writing this.

(Also, we did not read any of the comics with Thanos in them, so please excuse us if the characterization is a little bit off)

Comments would be awesome *_*
Fall

Chapter Notes

For everyone who is still shocked about the last chapter...just wait for the last one :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His last scream had went unheard, the noise inside his head and outside of his suit was much too loud. Loki's last words, the way his lips had moved when pronouncing 'love', the bright glow of his dying body all mixed together in a diffuse whirl of images and he closed his eyes, trying to hold them up in front of his inner vision as long as possible, while around him, the world fell apart.

Traveling through the dimensions by force felt like being a leaf in a thunderstorm. The external power dragging him down and down and down was cruel and chaotic and Tony was thrown from side to side, unable to steady his fall in any way. Just like a dry leaf, weakened by the hard months of autumn, he did not have the power to fight the harsh gusts of a storm that went more and more out of control. Soon, his unbraked fall stopped to be slowed down and felt more like the power of Loki's magic had to actively work against the forces of nature, trying to worm his way through, back to earth.

Upon coming closer to his destination, the resistance became more brutal - and Loki's magic weaker.

The first clinking of metal destroyed the image he had burned into his mind. His eyes widened in shock as the unpredictable force from outside tore away one of his shoulder plates, slashing wounds in his skin where it was exposed to the environment. Another part of his back-plates was ripped from its bracing, bursting up into an unnatural flame and Tony felt death licking on him, slicing more wounds in his flesh. Hot pain, a pain different from the pain inflicted by normal weapons.

The possibility to be torn to pieces, being ground to ashes between those otherworldly forces, became more and more likely the further he fell and, against his will, the felt his survival instinct kick in.

Aimless panic filled his mind when he became aware that there was no way to scramble out of this, and even though he still felt nothing but horror imagining that he could return to earth safely, his body refused to simply give up. There was no reason to live any more - but dying like this would be harrowing.

And then, suddenly, it stopped. All of it, completely.

Whereas moving against the dimensional powers had been loud and violent, simply falling in earth's atmosphere was almost peaceful in comparison. The whole experience had not lasted longer than a few seconds, but he felt like somebody had just blown away everything which filled his head. He could hardly adjust to the sudden change, his entire mind was nothing but scattered, jumbled pieces of emotions and images. Naturally it took him way too long to realize that he was about several thousand feet high in the air, falling with great speed.

"Sir", came Jarvis' loud voice from somewhere near his ear. He said something else, but it was
drowned by noise again.

Tony blinked and eventually looked down. Nothing but blue, the dark blue of the Pacific Ocean. Somewhere in the distance, a coast.
He was completely disoriented, the raging air flow was howling in his ears and his whole body hurt. Another clinking noise, then a few smaller parts from beneath the back-plates dislocated and were torn away by the wind. Around him, the suit was falling apart, the emergency reserves almost exhausted.
Only now, it dawned on him what was about to happen. He would be smashed by the hard, uninviting surface of the water beneath. The collision would be painful, but short. Loki's magic had not been strong enough to send him to the right place - only a few miscalculations and he was here, over thousand feet high above the ocean, falling without control, ready to be smashed to pieces after he had survived all of this.

It was laughable and a strange, croaking chuckle emerged from his throat. Maybe this was supposed to be it.

Tony closed his eyes again and let his body go limp, conjuring Loki's image in his head again. He should have been there when he died - either die with him or save him. This would be his punishment then, for his foolishness. 'I love you.', had been his last words. Tony's thoughts became scrambled again, hazy, and his fall started to feel like falling asleep.

A buzzing noise, then Jarvis' voice once more, interposing somewhere in the middle of a sentence about something that seemed very important. Tony did not want to hear.

The wind was still howling outside, and with a sudden force, the whole metallic surface of his left arm was yanked from his body and vanished in the air above him. The pain made his body spasm, the shattered bones screeching, but it was just his physics. It might hurt like fuck, but he did not care any longer.

Still, it was his A.I. that would not stop talking and involuntarily, he listened.

Just a few hundred feet more...

"- it against me. It will be to your own best, Sir. I'm sorry - for your loss."

What was he talking about?
The there were no more energy reserves left, the suit was only partly activated and-

A sudden glow of blue, then the metal around him shifted, became more tight-fitting and filled with a new electric power. Tony was too puzzled to react when suddenly, the thrusters in his boots were being activated and the whole suit went from manual to autopilot. Abruptly, his fall ended and the interrupted gravity bore down on him heavily for a second, but then, the Mark Omega made a downwards curve and rushed towards the Ocean's surface.

No, not again! Jarvis, that fool, that traitor, trying to save his miserable life - but for what?

“Jarvis, you.. stupid..”

His voice trailed off, unable to form a word that would accurately describe what he felt and persuade his most loyal companion to stop what he had been programmed to do. This time, he could just not muster the strength to stop him. There was just nothing left within him, not an ounce of willpower, of anger or grief. It was over anyway - if he would not be smashed on its surface, then he would drown, sinking to the ground of the ocean, dragged down by the heavy machinery around his body.

Just a few more feet, he could already see the pattern of blinking sunlight on the waves beneath. It was a bright morning, the sky would be blue today - no cloud visible.
"Good-bye, Sir."

Without a warning, the suit opened up on the front and Tony lost his grip.

Released to the harsh conditions of reality, he fell for a split-second, then cold, salty water engulfed him. The surface was still hard and painful, but he was soon floating deeper. Water was penetrating his nose, his mouth, his eyes, it burned in his wounds and hurt so fucking bad that he wanted nothing more than to escape it again.

Reflexively, he opened his mouth to breath, but it was only water that filled his lungs and the urge to cough became unbearable, but he just breathed in more of it. His body was fighting still, against his will and intentions, and he started struggling, trying to get on air again with a determination he had not thought possible a second ago.

In his struggle, he did not see how the suit ascended, flying higher and higher until it was barely visible any longer.

Just when his head splashed through the water's surface again, he heard the explosion, his face illuminated by the blue light for a second.

Coughing up water, strands of hair sticking to his face, eyes burning red with salt-water, he tried to swim, tried to breath while a mile away, the last remaining pieces of the Mark Omega rained down, to be lost forever in the blue deep.

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They all should have seen it coming, should have known that there was no way to end this whole affair without losing anyone of their team.

Nevertheless it had come as a surprise when Bruce had went to check on Tony and Loki this morning and returned with a panicked look and a greenish tint in his face to announce that both had disappeared – including the Mark Omega.

Twenty minutes later, the last remaining portal over the city had collapsed.

They all knew what that meant. Tony and Loki had left on their own accord, Loki's magic had somehow enabled them to pass the portal's shield that no one else had been able to pass. Somehow, they had destroyed whatever had been creating and maintaining the gate from the other side.

What it meant was clear: They had cut all ways back for themselves, but in the same move ensured that no one could come to their aid.

Still, Steve would have trusted them with this mission, usually, he would not have been concerned like that- if concerned was the right word. He was downright scared, pacing the house nervously, unable to contribute to the discussion in the living room.

It was that they both were not able to fight like this. Loki had been a wreck when they had brought him home, not even able to walk on his own, and Tony had been injured as well, his suit damaged and ready for more than a makeover.

Steve did not want to lose Tony just after having him returned to their team. Things had been looking up, even with Loki at their side. Now, everything they had archived with these two seemed destroyed within a few minutes.

Yet, he was not the only one suffering. Thor's situation was even worse. The god had not been able to stay inside the house and had left to fly over the city, searching the sky as if another portal would suddenly open up for him.

They all refrained from saying anything when he returned half an hour later, his mood even worse.
Steve could not even fathom how the god felt. Just after he had his brother returned to him and their familiar bond had been renewed, Loki was gone again. It was a delicate silence with which they all treated the Thunderer, all seeing the brooding storm within him.

Still, in the end, all they could do was to wait for something to happen.

Maybe, everything would be good. Maybe Tony and Loki would both return, victorious, having fought their battle and brought the world one big step closer to being saved from the destructive force that held it her in its grasp. Or maybe, they would not return at all.

It was Natasha who eventually received a message from SHIELD during the early morning hours, a message they had all been waiting for.

SHIELD’s radars had picked up something above the Pacific Ocean, an atmospheric disruption. No matter what was going to happen, whether Tony and Loki would reappear or not, or if they would just be faced with another horde of Chitauri - they would be there.

They did not come beyond the harbor, though.

It took Steve alone some persuasion, but eventually, a boat with three SHIELD agents on it allowed him to come with them. Of course, SHIELD had been there first, as they were everywhere first. They were the only search-party, the rest of the agents held back some people on the shore. Nobody was allowed in the water, not even the Avengers. With a disquieting feeling in his stomach, Steve entered the boat and left them at the harbor.

Seemingly, their combat power would not be needed today, but the Captain could not just stay in the Quinjet with the other teammembers. He knew that he wanted to be able to act properly if something happened – no matter what – and the jet had no chance to operate in the water, or even land on it.

The small motor-boat was pretty fast and the SHIELD agents did not talk a lot. Steve knew none of them, but they all knew him. They were guided by a small hand-held GPS system which seemed to have picked up the coordinates of something unusual in the water.

Above their heads, the Quinjet took off again, searching the sky.

They still did not know what exactly they would discover once they had reached the spot where one falling object had went down. Steve had been told that the odd object had appeared all of a sudden, several thousand feet above the ocean, falling constantly like a stone.

One object – not two.

That alone meant that something had went wrong, terribly wrong.

His feeling of unease only intensified when he the sky suddenly lit up with a bright blue explosion, its color bright against the light of the beginning day. Steve knew the origin of that light, but he could neither tell to whom of the two it belonged to.

He did not know what to make of it and only wished he could make the agents go faster, but he feared this boat could not gain any more speed. Were they still fighting, high up in the sky? Or had something entirely else occurred?

Behind them, the shore became smaller and smaller and soon, he could not distinguish any longer between the people he had left there. Except for the waves rocking the boat and the noise of the motor, it was silent out here.
As it was typical in the morning, the sea was calm, like a velvet blanket. Steve's eyes searched the dark blue, looking for something, anything that would give a-

A piece of blackish metal was floating in the water.

On his command, the boat slowed down and chugged closer, so that Steve could fish it out of the waves, observing it from all sides. It definitely was a part of the Mark Omega, which meant...

His gaze lifted again and he stared in the distance. Only a few feet further away, he discovered him. A body, floating in the ocean, lifeless, a plaything for the waves. Panic flooded him at the sight.

"Over there, fast!"

The soldier pointed onto the unmoving body, and the boat moved around, floating closer, one agent hectically muttering in his headset.

What if they were too late – what if Tony had not survived his fall? Steve did not know if he would be able to deal with failing Tony another time. He had sworn himself to do better, after he had failed to help him when the inventor had been drinking himself into a stupor, back in his mansion.

When he got a proper look at Tony's body, the supersoldier felt how his heart stopped for just a moment. His whole body was covered in wounds, they were everywhere, torn through his clothing, his shoulder, chest, abdomen, face... his left arm seemed somehow disconnected from his body, floating in an awkward angle, broken and littered with deep gashes. The water around him had taken on a reddish hue.

Tony had his eyes closed, his face looked almost peaceful.

Steve felt his ribcage tighten and his heart stumble, then move on with increased speed. It could not be... Tony could not be dead!

As soon as they were close enough, he leaned forward out of the boat and grabbed the limp body with his arms under the other's back, easily heaving him out of the water and into the boat. His heart sunk when he felt Tony's body in his arms, as lifeless and unmoving as before, but the moment the other's back touched the hard surface of the boat, he suddenly woke up.

His eyes opened, wide with fear and panic, and reflexively, the inventor tried to scramble away, until his disoriented gaze found Steve.

The soldier kept his distance in the first moment, and they both sat there, two feet away from each other, the silent SHIELD agents behind him. Yet, when he noticed the desperate look in the other's eyes, the shaking of his limbs, he dared to move forward again.

Still, what happened next surprised even him. Tony was suddenly close, his soaking wet form pressed against him while his one working hand clung to the soldier's clothing as if his life depended on it. He did not do anything else, did not speak or move, just stayed in exactly that position until Steve hesitantly put his arms around his friend, pulling him to his chest.

He did not know how to ask, but the question was inevitable.

“Tony, where is Loki?”

There was no response to the question, the only reaction a light shiver that run through his body at the mention of the other's name. That was answer enough.
Steve bit his lip, carefully trying to ignore the lump building in his throat when he imagined what
Loki had been through – what Tony was going through right now.

The men around where all silent, staring at them or visibly choosing to look at the seaside while in
front of them, the genius who had helped to build the modern digital world clawed into the back of
his friend like a helpless child.
Steve did not ask again what had happened to Loki. He knew that he had not made it back and that
was enough knowledge for now. There was no need to make Tony endure the How's and Why's,
this was not the moment for it. Right now, he doubted that there would come any moment in near
future where the other would be able to tell what had happened in space. It made Steve sad, terribly
sad, to even imagine what this loss would do to Tony.

Still, there was just one thing he needed to know and this could not wait.

"Tony."

His voice was low, only directed at the man who still had his hand clawed in the fabric of Steve's
hoodie. He could not see Tony's face, but he felt that he was still shaking, jerkily, but without a
sound, fighting with all his power to keep himself together. Steve bent his head down a bit further,
speaking directly in the other's ear as calm as possible.

"Tony.. there's just one thing."

It took some time before he reacted. Their small boat was rocking in the waves and a salty breeze
blew in Steve's face. It was almost warm today, a day on which you felt that the Californian spring
would soon come
A faint rustle, then the inventor moved, pushing himself away from Steve.

He looked terrible, worse than the blonde remembered him to look like, even in the ugliest phase.
Not just the wounds and the broken arm, hanging from his body like it did not belong there. No, it
was his face, wearing an expression that frightened Steve.
There was no life in his eyes, nothing.
Completely deprived of any strength, he looked more than just tired. He looked more dead than
alive, his reddened eyes still shining from tears, their dark brown, usually glistening with sharp wit,
empty. Water was running down from his soaked hair, the long strands of his messy haircut
sticking on his pale face, his clothes dark from a mixture of water and blood.

In this moment, he looked so small, so vulnerable, that Steve barely dared to ask what he had to
ask. Yet, there was no way around it, because this was his role on board of this boat: emotional
consolation on the one hand, but on the other, there were numerous people waiting for vital
information.

Steve swallowed before he went on, unsure how to express his compassion.

"I'm... I'm so sorry Tony. Really. He was so brave and- I don't know what to say."

His words caused a twitch in the corner of Tony's mouth, but otherwise, he remained completely
silent. He just looked at the supersoldier, waiting, not capable of any emotional reaction any
longer.

"I have to ask: Have you been able to kill Thanos?"

The inventor's eyes darkened at the question and he averted his gaze. For a second, Steve thought
that the other might be close to yelling something at him, but he did not. Instead, a raw, dry chuckle
erupted from his mouth and the corners of his lips curled into a bitter smile. When he looked back up and met his eyes, there was an almost cruel glow to them.

"Yes."

"Thank God."

Steve had not meant to say that, but had just sort of blurted it out. Of course, he was allowed to be glad that such a tremendous threat to the entire universe was finally annihilated, yet thanking a God Tony did not believe in for the cause of the loss he had just experienced felt terribly ill-timed. He bit his tongue and scolded himself inwardly, then turned around to the agents, giving them an approving sign and urging them to return to shore immediately.

Tony needed medical care and psychological support as soon as possible, probably tranquilizers and strict observation as long as he was in this critical state.

When Steve turned around to him again, he was no longer looking at him.

Well, he was, but he was not there anymore, his gaze not actively directed at anything. Tony just stared right through him, in a distance where he could not follow, as if someone had turned a switch in him. It was a body's natural reaction after enduring whatever he had had to endure out there and now, all reserves seemed to be drained.

Steve wanted to say something at first, but then decided differently and just put his hand on Tony's shoulder. The other did not react, neither jerked nor looked at him.

Perhaps, Steve thought, it was better for him to space out for a bit - because if you looked around, there was not much for him to look forward to, now.

The boat made a slow turn, then gained speed once they were driving a straight line again. He could hear the SHIELD agents talk over their head-sets, giving order to collect what was left of the Mark Omega, to send experts to look after the atmospheric disruption. He did not intervene or comment on it, he stayed at Tony's side, his hand never leaving the other's body.

In his mind, he went through all the things he had thrown at Loki, all the accusations and the biased judgments and he wondered what had happened out there, what a truly fascinating thing it was that two persons alone had defeated Thanos and at least one of them came back alive.

He also thought that the following days would be hard, not only for Tony, and he wondered whether things would ever be the same again. They would not, certainly.

When their boat reached the shore, there was already an ambulance waiting for them, medics standing around, waiting for Tony to get out of the boat.

The inventor had not moved since and still did not move, just continued with his quiet staring, apathetic, as if he had fallen asleep with open eyes. Steve was sure that he would not get back up onto his feet, not today. Even if he had enough strength in his legs to do so – and the soldier was sure he had not – there was no will to move.

“Tony.”

No reaction.

“I will carry you over there, alright?”

The other man still did not respond, did not even look at him. Yet, Steve felt better when he talked to Tony, trying for some sort of consent, instead of just manhandling him like a doll.

Cautious not to touch any of the wounds, he put his hands under Tony's back and his legs, then lifted him off the boat and carried him onto land again.
He dropped him onto the cot already waiting for him, and the moment Steve stepped backwards, the medics were already swarming around the wounded man, removing his shirt, hooking him to an IV and beginning to disinfect and treat the wounds.

The first reaction Tony showed was when someone moved his broken arm, but it was only a twitch of his head and a short moment when he stared at the ruined limb, before his head sunk back. He was given an injection – morphine, Steve assumed – and only then his eyes fell shut and his battered body gave in to the exhaustion.

A few civilians had gathered around the spot, more than when he had driven off with the boat. They too had seen the explosion above the ocean and were now out to get a look at what exactly was happening, but were held back by other SHIELD agents.

The Quinjet soared above, ready to land. Obviously, Natasha had received the message that they had found what they had came for. The herd of civilians was shooed to the side and the jet landed a few feet away, whirling up dust and sand. A moment later, the ramp opened and its passengers were streaming outside, Bruce, Clint, Natasha and... right, Thor. Steve mentally braced himself, but every time he tried to find the right words in his head to tell what was his burden to tell, he could only imagine Thor's face when the news about his brother would break him.

“Did you find them?”

Natasha was the one walking in front of the group, her eyes having already found Tony, although still surrounded by medics. They just gave him the last treatments before he would be carted off to a hospital. Steve did not answer her, though. In this moment, his thoughts did not revolve around Tony, but the blonde god who approached the scene. You only needed to look in his eyes to see that he knew something was not alright.

It was Bruce who asked the question Steve had feared to hear.

“Where is Loki?”

All gazes were on him, but Steve could not stop looking at Thor. His mouth only opened hesitantly, the intense blue of the thunderer's eyes paralyzing him. Never in his life he had had to deliver a message so cruel.

“He... he did not make it back. Loki is dead.”

The reaction was immediate and for a second, Steve felt like Loki's blood was running down his own hands, as if he had slaughtered the god here, right now, in front of his brothers eyes. Thor's face crumpled, his blue eyes filling with tears, tears he had never seen on him. His expression changed from disbelief to desperation, the same desperation Tony had shown just a few minutes prior.

Still staring at Steve alone, his lips mouthed words, but no sound came out. It was always the same word.

'No'.

Steve knew that he could not help here, that every attempt at soothing the Thunderer would have been in vain. He could barely imagine what it must be like and he would not change with Thor in
this moment, not for anything in this world. After finally being reunited with his brother – the brother that had once meant everything to him – now, he had to hear that he was dead. Not disappeared, not lost in the unknown. He was dead, Tony had seen him dying. This time, Loki would not return. They had barely had two days with each other, two days which could not make up for all the years they had lost before.

Thunder cracked above, first in the distance, then close enough to make somebody scream. Dark, towering clouds gathered on the sky, darkening the promising morning sun for the whole city to see the unbearable pain in Thor's heart. The first drop of rain fell, then the second, then the sky broke to release floods of water. They were all drenched within seconds, but nobody moved. One gush of wind and Thor was carried upwards, vanishing in the darkness, lighting streaking when he disappeared out of sight. Maybe, it was for the better right now.

It was still raining and the spectators started to hurry back to their houses – nobody had thought about bringing an umbrella on this day. Bruce had stepped over to Tony, watching how he the cot was hurriedly shoved out of the rain, into the car and the doors closed behind him. Somehow, Steve had a bad feeling, but for now they could do nothing else than let the medics do their work.

“We will take care of him.”, one of them said, directed at Steve when he saw his concerned look. The supersoldier did not doubt that, SHIELD had the best facilities in the whole region - especially after the Chitauri-attack. And still, he had the feeling that he should follow along, should be there once Tony woke up again.

Being there was the only way to help his friend right now.

“I want to come with you. I can follow behind.”

“That won't be necessary, Sir. He won't wake up until tomorrow. You are welcome then, if it's that important to you. Good Bye.”

The man left, entering the ambulance, before his colleague started the engine and the car rushed off with blue lights, water splashing to the sides. On the streets, big puddles created in smaller cracks and depressions in the asphalt. It was still raining pitchforks, single droplets fell from Steve's nose and eyebrows.

He watched until the car disappeared around the next corner, leaving him with a numb and surreal feeling.

Tony and Loki had killed the one responsible for billions of dead. They had saved the earth from a cruel end, from a disastrous apocalypse.

Yet, there was no praise, no happy outcome for them, no parades to celebrate. They had paid the price, and although Steve knew that it had been a necessary act, he still could not stop himself from thinking that all of this was just terribly unfair.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter on Sunday :)

We're going to see The Winter Soldier tomorrow :D *excited*

Comments are always very much appreciated!
"...for a whole week..."

Snatches of conversation.

"... cosmic entity, still unconfirmed..."

Words without any meaning.

"... considering amputation, but..."

Blurred silhouettes, wandering.

"...public outcry, if not handled with utmost caution and delicacy of feeling..."

Nothing came through to Tony. No words made it behind the thick curtain of dull nothingness which had closed around him as a shield against the cruel reality. When the mind hit its limits, there were ways to secure the bits left of sanity.

Everything was in a fog.

He was not awake, but he heard words. Voices he did not recognize saying things which made no sense and always slipped away again when he made the weak attempt to grasp them. For a time he could not quiet tell, he was not there. No thoughts entering his head on their own accord, a blissful state of blankness, the only interruption the words from a distant outside world, fading away before they could reach a deeper meaning.

There was no pain, he did not even feel his body. All there was was warmth and silence, like floating in sunlight.

It was peaceful, for the time it lasted. If he had been able to articulate that condition, it would be what he always had thought dying to be like.

When he awoke again, he did not realize he was awake at first. His body had started booting again, yet his mind somehow dragged behind. The processing of stimuli from the outside world, their emotional and cognitive evaluation and the drawing of conclusions from these information did not work in sync yet.

Tony felt dizzy, like he was wrapped up in cotton wool - and he felt weak. For what felt like ages, he stared at the whiteness of the opposite wall, unable to move his head which did not bother him until finally, it came through to him that he was in a hospital bed and that there was more to the outside world than a blank wall.

With great effort, he turned his head, taking in what he saw without really knowing what it meant. A lot of white, a lot of metal. Machines of all kinds, monitoring his bodily functions, tubes and wires, a white blanket that had slid from his feet. His gaze somehow stuck at the sight of his great toe, unable to move again. It was the only colored thing he could make out, a thing, like everything else, not attached to his body.

Where should be normal, pink skin, was blue and dark red and shades of green and nasty cuts and Tony could not comprehend how a foot could look that bad.
Then, he remembered Loki.

The memory hit him out of the blue, burned away every bit of peace and whitened out his senses for a second. It hit him so hard that he might have screamed, the bed was clattering with his abrupt movement and from the door, two nurses rushed inside, saying his name and calling for help, but all Tony could think off was Loki.

Loki was dead, he had died in front of him. He was alone now. Everything he loved had died and he had nothing left.

Loki was dead. He was dead.

Somebody managed to fix his arm in place and then an injection made the foggy curtain close around him again.

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The rain never stopped.

It kept on raining the entire day, throughout the night and, on the next day, just continued without an interruption, a steady downpour of water. Even at this time of the year, it never rained that much in California, but still, everyone knew that they could not do anything to stop the god who was the cause of it from his grieving.

Thor had not returned after he had flown off, but they knew that he must be close by, the never receding rain was proof enough. They could only fathom the god's intentions, why he had not retreated to Asgard yet. He was probably waiting for Tony to return from the hospital, to question him about his brother's demise. Or maybe, Thor wanted to stay and make sure that Earth would win the fight against the remaining Chitauri – it was assumed that there were still millions left, many of them located on Earth. Nobody knew about the amount still waiting out in space.

Also, nobody could tell if they would attack anew or if they would recede – now, that their leaders had been killed.

But that was not Steve's concern, not right now. His thoughts were a few miles away, at a SHIELD facility from which he knew that Tony would be stationed there. He wanted to be there when the inventor woke up, make sure that things would not get worse through the wrong treatment. He owed it to Tony.

If he was honest with himself - they were the only ones that would look after him.

The SHIELD base still looked very much the same like half a year prior, as did the medical wing, where Steve had visited Tony not so long ago. Things had seemed hopeless then, and it was strange how much had changed in such a short amount of time. Things were looking up now, for humanity, for earth. But for Tony, it was worse than ever before.

Steve and Bruce were checked at the entrance of the hospital – it were only the two of them, since Natasha and Clint had other duties to attend and therefore chosen not to come along with them, Thor was still nowhere to be seen – and allowed inside, instantly heading towards the receptionist. The woman behind the counter knew Steve well enough to know why he had come without asking first. She took a look at the computer in front of her, checking through the information, frowning briefly, then looking back up to the two men in front of her.

“I think his Doctor wanted to speak to you anyway. He's in block B.”
Steve hated hospitals and upon walking down the long aisles towards the block they were heading to, he had enough time to remember why. They just reminded him of too many things. Of his mother, but in a bad way, how she had returned every evening, looking more and more worn with every day until she had not been able to endure the strain anymore. It reminded him of the war, the one back in the 40's and the current one, of the suffering and the countless lives that had been lost.

He could get a glimpse of wounded SHIELD agents lying behind half-opened doors, some of them conscious, even out of the bed, some of them sleeping with injuries of varying degrees. The worst cases were not even here, though, but further down the hall. It was also the place where they would find Tony, safely locked away in the intensive care.

Guards with machine guns passed them while walking by – the reason for their stay was not entirely obvious for Steve. The last time guards had been stationed in the hospital wing had been during Loki's stay there, and he did not know of any other dangerous patients currently occupying the hospital.

Eventually, Steve spotted the white-clad Doctor at the end of the hallway, just one doorway away from the intensive care where Tony would have his room.

The woman, who had been talking to one of the guards until now turned around as she saw them. Steve remembered her only faintly – tall, in her mid-forties, blond hair – but he was not here to make light conversation with her anyway. He wanted to know about Tony's condition, nothing else.

“We want to visit Tony Stark. The receptionist said that he's in station B.”

“Did nobody tell you?”

“Tell us what?”

Steve felt his blood freezing at the Doctor's suspicious question. What should he know? What had happened in their absence?

A disquieting feeling spread in his guts. Even though he did not know what he was about to hear now, Steve already regretted that he had not been more resilient the previous day. He should have had insisted on accompanying Tony to the hospital.

“Since you are technically no relatives of him, I'm not allowed to give away certain inform-”

A very dangerous glare from both Steve and Bruce silenced the woman, and she continued, now with a changed tone.

“Mr. Stark's condition was already critical when he arrived here, but it got worse during the night. His wounds were infected with the Chitauri-II-Virus. He died around 5am.”

During the first seconds, Steve thought he would lose the ground beneath his feet and tumble over, his head becoming dizzy and his limbs suddenly deprived of any strength. However, the sensation faded as quickly as it had come, because what he just heard could not be right. It did not make sense.

Apparently, Steve was not the only one who thought so.

“Why didn't you call us? You know that Tony has no family, so we're the ones responsible for him. I saw him yesterday - he was showing no sign of an infection. I treated enough infected soldiers to know what it looks like and how fast it kills. This is nonsense.”

Steve could not agree more. Bruce knew what he was talking about, he had treated people with that
virus under the worst of conditions, and he had been able to get a close look on Tony before the engineer had been carted off. The wounds had been severe, probably lethal if not treated, but his death was something that nobody would have prognosticated.

“We want to see him.”, Steve said deadpan, his expression and voice giving no room for objections or discussions.

The doctor's gaze darted to the side for just the moiety of a second, but then she regained her composure, answering:

“That's not possible. The corpse is contaminated, it has already been transported off. You cannot see him.”

This time, Steve did not manage to remain calm. He noticed a bad excuse if he heard one, and this was nothing but lying in his face. Something had happened to Tony. They had done something to him!

“What did you do?!”

Steve was almost yelling, his body suddenly moving forward, walking the woman backwards until she was pressed against a counter. He would never lay a hand on her, but in this case, something came over him.

“I swear, if you have let him die, or killed him...”

He took a little step closer, then suddenly froze. It was not the sudden clicking of guns being unlocked that made him step back from the Doctor again, though, but a hand on his shoulder. When Steve turned around he saw Bruce, looking at him with an almost pleading expression. They exchanged a glance, then Steve sighed, letting the tension ease from his shoulders and moved away.

He could not lose his composure here, not even in a situation like this. If Bruce would have an uncontrolled transformation in a place like this - a hospital! - he would never forgive himself.

“You should leave.”

The doctor's voice was quiet, but one could still see that Steve's sudden outburst had shocked her. Behind him, the guard shifted closer, the barrel of his semi-automatics pointed at Steve's head. Only reluctantly, Steve turned around, glaring back at the medic before heading of back towards the exit.

The faint panic and sadness he felt at the prospect of Tony's probable fate was still drowned by his own anger, and when he pushed the doors open to get outside, he had to hold back not to accidentally unhinge them.

How could he have been so foolish to allow SHIELD to transport Tony off without a second thought?

He should have known that they had been planning something, that they would do something with the man they had been hunting for over half a year now.

“I'm sorry.”, Bruce said once they were out of the clinic again, looking as shaken as Steve felt.

If not for Bruce, Steve would have had no problem with overpowering the guards and get the doctor to spill the information to him. He usually was not one to intimidate civilians, but Steve's patience regarding SHIELD had reached an end.

“What if they killed him?” he voiced his greatest concern, the realization slowly sinking in.
The other man only fiddled with his glasses nervously, looking at him with the same worry in his eyes. Tony was Bruce's friend too, although their last days spent in the house had not really suggested that. He worried as much as Steve, but still sounded sincere when he answered.

“They won't have him killed. To be honest, I think they'd do everything to keep him alive. He is too valuable for them, now that he is vulnerable enough to be brought under control.”

This sounded not only reasonable, but by far the best thought to cling to at the moment. Never would SHIELD waste a mind like this. The problem was, though – if you thought one step ahead – that he had no idea where they had brought the inventor.

He could be everywhere - but...

“The arc-reactor!”

“What about it?”

The scientist looked suspicions at first, but it needed only a split-second to dawn on him. Then, his face lit up with newly fueled enthusiasm.

“You're right, the energy signature. They can not remove it from Tony as long as they want him to stay alive. A tracing-algorithm can be easily developed.”

Fortunately, they were already off SHIELD's property, walking along the side of a street, where no one could hear them. Which was not guaranteed, given the amounts of eyes and ears SHIELD maintained around the city, but better here, than elsewhere. Rain was pouring down on them, but neither of the two cared.

One battle was just over, but the next one was already due.

They would find out what happened to Tony, and then make SHIELD pay for it.

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During the next days - whether it were days or weeks or just hours he could not tell exactly - he sort of drifted in and out of consciousness again and again.

When he woke up the next time, he remembered where he was and what had happened instantly. It was like startling from a nightmare, yet without the nightmare - his sleep was completely dreamless, just black and heavy.

This time, however, the thought of Loki was not the trigger for such distress. They had to have given him antidepressants or something the like he figured out after a some time, maybe tranquilizers. It was weird, because the pictures were in his head, the entire time, but their effect on him was almost nullified. What was left inside of him was only a dull ache, a faint feeling of emptiness inside of his chest.

Tony remained in bed the entire days, his body feeling shattered and heavy like stone. The pain never got the chance to get through to his consciousness, the morphine made sure of that. He did not get bored, though, or felt the urge to do something - there was nothing in this world he would have liked to do now.

The only thing he did was seeking refuge in aimless daydreams.

His mind just wandered while his body got better and the colorful palette of bruises changed from blue, brown and red to green and unhealthy shades of yellow. What happened to the rest of his
body was out of his sight - his left arm was put in plaster, completely, from his hand right up to his
shoulder blade. It was a comminuted fracture, a real bitch to treat if he had understood the doctor
well, and the likeliness of regaining unimpeded use ever again was small. He did not care, though.

In fact, the lack of care for everything was the only real emotion left within him.

He did not care, for example, that he was obviously, more or less, a prisoner of SHIELD. Watching
the nurses and doctors come and go, he had noticed the logo often enough to be able to estimate
where he was. The lack of visitors other than those nurses and doctors was another sure sign that
his stay here was about more than just his health. Yet, he could not bring himself to be outraged.
He had no idea what he would be doing if they would let him go, so he did not feel caged.
It was vaguely amusing to see that there were still people caring for what became of him - not of
him as a human being, but of him as a name and a position - when he would be perfectly fine with
them to give him the maximum dose of morphine - and a bit more.

Whether he would live on like this or die - it was all the same to him.

Even though he was figuring out more and more of his condition and whereabouts, it was nothing
of his concern any longer. His daydreams did not revolve around SHIELD, he did not project into
the future. All he did was clinging to the last memories he had shared with Loki, the terrible last
images, but also the better ones.
He often remembered kissing Loki, their first kiss, but also their desperate kisses they had
exchanged in this one night in the cellar - and the kiss they had not shared, the kiss that had been
held back before they had left for the portal. His lips tingled vaguely when he thought of that and
the ache in his chest grew larger, pressing against his lungs and making it harder to breath.

Only a few months had been enough to build a new world from ash, a world so different from the
one he had inhabited before that it had felt thrilling and worthy to spend his life in. Loki had saved
him and made him better than he had ever been, or worse, depending on whose stories you would
like to believe.
In his head, he relived the past over and over, because it had by far not been enough. He had to
make up alternate endings, possible futures, scenes in which the weight of the world would not
weigh heavy on their shoulders, in which they lived somewhere, in relative peace of mind. He did
not demand total peace, he knew it to be impossible, but there was no greed in wishing for some
more time with each other.

Sometimes he realized he hardly knew Loki - he could not bring himself to use the past tense, it
just did not felt right in his head - and that he was over a thousand years old and that thought made
him angry in a stupid, childish way, because there had been people spending centuries with Loki
and he had just been allowed those ridiculously short amount of time. His anger never made it past
a diffuse feeling of distress, though.
He was thinking, constantly, his mind unable to rest in a body that was forced to stay unmoved. So
much sensations to process, so much to think about, and all rushed by in the cinema that was his
head, presented to him by his over-active subconscious.

When his mind wandered, it also grazed the other people in his life, but he never felt able to
concentrate on what good they had done to them.
In a way, he had fulfilled what he had left his home to do for: He had taken revenge for Pepper's
death, for the death of hundreds and thousands, millions. Yet, it did not taste like triumph ought to
taste, it tasted hollow and cruel and like a bad joke. He thought about the other Avengers some
times, wondered why Steve did not fight his way through to see him, because he knew he would
and wondered whether Thor felt worse than him.
About Thor, though, he did not think very often.

Sometimes, he noticed his sight becoming blurred and his face feeling hot and then he realized that there were tears running down his cheeks again, but they always came off time, when he was not expecting them. Even when his mind was a blank, there was something working beneath, working to cope with what had happened, but always held in check by chemical substances blocking the right neurotransmitters.

Tony wondered how he could handle those thoughts day and night, if not for whatever medication he was on. He wondered whether he would just die immediately if he plucked off all the tubes he was attached to, but he never did.

Without feeling appealed by it, he thought about death often.

It was maybe a week or more since he had been brought here, but time now had officially lost its meaning.

When one of the doctors entered again in the middle of some unidentifiable day, he did not look at her, it was not an unusual sight. From the outside, it was probably hard to tell what was going on inside of him - if something was going on inside of him. In the beginning, people had tried to talk to him, the nurses had tried their encouraging chit-chat, but it had died down eventually when they noticed that he would not answer.

So, it was a new thing that the doctor did not check for his data, but just positioned herself at the side of his bed and started talking.

"Mr. Stark, you will be transferred at the end of the week. Director Nick Fury of SHIELD is here to inform you about the backgrounds of this decision."

With these words, the woman left him alone. Slowly, Tony turned his head to the door and sat up a bit straighter, his back leaning against the bed's headrest. When the director entered, a cold, indifferent glare was all he gave him for a welcome.

Fury just shot him a quick look, then closed the door behind him and came a few steps closer. As soon as he was about to say something, Tony turned his head to the side again, as if he had barely realized a change in the room - as if the wall was more interesting. Whatever would come out of the director's mouth, nothing would be bad enough to tear wounds deeper than the ones already clawed in his chest.

"Congratulations for your success, Stark. Nobody knows exactly what happened, not even us, but you seem to have accomplished something."

Tony only listened half-heartedly, this was only empty rhetoric.

Even though, he was not looking at him, he realized how utterly worn and tired the director looked. In the end, whatever SHIELD would sell as a victory now would be nothing but a farce. It would be impossible to build and maintain, the world would still be cruel and ugly and there would come other fights.

If you looked at it that way, Tony had more pull here. You just could not lose more than the tiny little bit you had left.

"Yet, there is a reason nobody sends you cards or flowers."

The other made a strategic pause in this place, trying to cause some sort of reaction, a movement which would indicate interest or curiosity.

Tony just listened, already half-expecting what was to come next. Only half, however, because the next words were not anticipated at all.

"We deleted you from all files, after your supposed death by the Chitauri-II-virus."
Always the same procedure. From that moment on, Tony decided that it would not change anything if he just did not listen any longer. Fury went on, though, urgent to get his message across.

"It was a necessary step and you know exactly why. When you don't talk to me, hell, I gladly take that part for you, makes it a lot easier."

Fury did not sound like he was justifying anything. He sounded like he knew exactly that he did the right thing. Tony wondered silently why they killed him only on paper - it would have been so much easier, for both parties, if they had just let him die on the operating table. He did not say anything, though, his gaze remained staring at the left wall.

"I think I don't have to list the reasons, for you know that your actions were in both parts very brave and very egocentric, like usually. You made a lot of inexcusable decisions - decisions that killed people. In our eyes and the eyes of the World Security Council, you're more a threat now than a hero. You did the world a great service, Stark, but the world is not in need of heroes like you are any longer. A new era begins, an era of reconstruction and thriving and we can not allow elements that still drag along the sludge of the past, so to speak."

Fury paused again, his grim features almost pissed off that he did not cause any reaction. Yet, he was too much of a pro to let it shine through. Tony silently wondered what had made the man leave the most important variable out of this equation – Loki – but it occurred to him, that the god had probably died as a mentionable problem the second as he had died in person.

Two different worlds – they had just nothing to say to each other any longer. Still, it went on.

"This is nothing personal, but in the same time entirely personal."

If what the director said would have held any meaning to him any longer, he would have laughed in his face now. For all the deceit, all the hypocrisy, all the lies and the scheming. Yet, it did not matter any longer. The world would go down, but he would not longer be there to see it. They had saved a world, just to let it be killed again from men like this. He did not want to think that Loki died for this, for nothing, but the thought forced itself upon him.

Tony remained silent, clenching his jaw and staring at the wall. Fury chuckled.

"I wish I could promise you a decent funeral, but you can imagine why we can not allow an open coffin."

With these words, the director turned to the door to leave again.

Chapter End Notes

This is awful, we know D:
And apologize to Fury...
Last chapter on Tuesday, yay!
Comments please? We always love to hear what you are thinking *_*
1st April, as promised!
We're kind of proud that we could stick to our own deadline :)

Trigger warnings for this chapter (I don't know if it's even necessary after everything that happened, but we'll do it anyway), look in the notes under the chapter for that.
Don't want to spoiler ^_^

In comparison to the room in the hospital, the cell was a real improvement.
The room was as clean and dead as the one before with it's concrete walls and neon lights, but the bed was not so uncomfortably soft, there was a chair and a desk (but nothing you could do which would induce sitting there) and he even had decent sanitary facilities. Once a day, there was a warm meal and the guy who brought it always added the daily newspaper. Mostly, he did not touch neither of it - the newspaper appeared to him as nothing but cynical - it only increased the feeling of being cut from the world.
In here, he was alone, entirely thrown back on himself and it did nothing to improve his condition. Not that he wanted it improved, anyway.
The one time he had looked in the mirror, his thoughts had not been for the shocking sight of his face - shocking, because he both looked incredibly worn down, but in the same time not even close to what he felt like - but for the existence of a mirror in general. It was easy to slam your fist into it and it would create numerous shards sharp enough to cut through flesh. Whatever flesh that would be, he had not exactly decided. It was just... nice to know that there was an exit plan.
Since he had been brought here - walking on his own legs, wrists in handcuffs which hardly closed around his plaster - they had stopped the medication. There still came a small baby-blue pill with every dinner, but he rarely took it. It was like a silent agreement between the guards outside and him that if they did not bother him, he would not make them trouble. Still, he did not see the need to comply to the terms of this agreement and started to garner the pills at the small space between mattress and bed frame.
It was a risky game and he was very well aware of the camera in the corner above the door, but he always managed to leave them in his sleeve until he went to bed and hid them. Sooner or later, their number would accumulate to exit plan B.
Without the medication, his thoughts were much clearer and his injuries had started to hurt again.

His arm could hardly be moved and was extremely annoying to handle, but he barely changed clothes anyway. Every time he dared to put weight on it, the pain flared up all the way from wrist to shoulder, driving tears in his eyes. The rest of his wounds was in several different states of severity, but all of them healed well and only bothered him marginally. It was not his body that was the problem: As soon as he had spent about a week here, laying still became unbearable for him. With proceeding recovery, his urge to move grew larger and only added to his inner feeling of hectic distress.
In about ten square meters and with a broken arm, the limitations to do sports were many.
The other thing was, that even if his body longed for it, he could not bring himself to move. There was no reason to acquire the best possible health-condition again - as prisoner in a room without any activity, there was no reason to get out of bed at all. He did not hope for somebody to save him, neither did he look forward to the day when SHIELD would eventually come to a point where he could be of use for them. There was only one thing he hoped for every day and that was sleep - sweet, blissfully heavy slumber.

What he got, however, were nightmares.

They returned like on command, the night after he had left out the medication. If they had not been so horrifying, he would have laughed at their simplicity, their stupendous way of endlessly retelling the same story over and over. They crushed him like a wave every time he dozed off, like they had been bottled up until now. Two or three times, guards had stormed into his room in the middle of the night to see why he was screaming, but every time they had only encountered him in bed, startled from his sleep with eyes wide like those of a trapped animal. After they had to awkwardly leave the room again three times, seemingly not suited to be that close to a stranger's nightly terror, they did not look after him a fourth time. Until now, there had not been a night in which he had not dreamed like that. It was comforting, in a twisted, cruel way, though: Only in those nightmares, Loki's face was real to him. Only there, he could hear his voice again and only there, he was alive - for a few, disastrous seconds. Somehow, nightmares seemed to be a proneness of him - as if he had not been right there when the real thing happened.

As if he had not been there when Loki died.

It was maddening to think of him. His thoughts always returned to the god, though, but every time he became aware of the subject of his thinking, he winced, trying to avoid it. An image had been burned into his mind, an image he had not seen but could not get out of his head, either: Loki's corpse, out there, forever stranded on this empty rock in space, rotting at the side of Thanos' slayed body. He could not help but imagine the still existent Chitauri mutilate him - there was no limit to the degree of cruelty in his fantasies and it always spiraled further downwards.

In the end, he knew that all of this was punishment - not for the things Fury said he had done. Yes, he was responsible for the death of innocents, but this was not what it was all about. It was not even what Fury was all about. This was about daring to do the right thing and find personal happiness. He had known it all along, since Loki had worked the teleportation spell on him. Right after he said that he loved him... Tony had never got the chance to prove this love. He had failed Loki, like he had failed Pepper. It was so brutal, inhumanely brutal, that he had been there when both of them had died. If he had been just a bit faster, he could have saved not only Pepper, but Loki, too. There was no way to compare the feelings he had shared with both of them, but the result was the same: the death of those he loved was his fault.

It was like he had entered the same cosmos of cognitions again - guilt, grief, self-loathing, boredom and hopelessness. Just like he had never been away.

Depression always opened her door for you again, like an old welcoming friend, but that would never hinder her from stabbing you in the back the second you were over the threshold. If seeing Loki die in front of him after they had barely made it had been his death, too, then this was likely hell. There was always time to struggle and scream when you were grabbed by a force and made to hit the ground hard, but this was something else. This was a slimy abyss, sleek and
with no place to hold on to and he was inevitably going down, never hitting the floor, always going deeper and deeper.

He would never get out of here if he would not do it himself. The problem was, he had not found the courage – at least not yet.

Tony spent most of the day in bed - not a big change from before. He was laying in bed on his blanket, hands folded on his stomach, eyes staring at that one small dark spot at the ceiling until his view started to blur. Only when his legs started to fall asleep, he stood up to move to the chair to sit down there, or the wall, to sink down on it until he hit the floor. It was a small circle of boredom and misery, his body's last attempt to run from the panic still dwelling in his chest. It was a panic that never stopped, not since he had heard Loki scream in the crunching grip of Thanos' fists. This feeling of panic was the only thing that made him move or drink or splash some water in his face, the only fuel his body was still running on. It was involuntarily and had its side effects, always making him flinch when a guard outside accidentally hit the weapon against something, or when he realized that his own heartbeat was way too loud.

Panic and grief battled in his chest, chasing him out of bed to run with a mind that wanted nothing but sleep, sleep and never wake up. The longer he stayed in this cell, the more his certainty grew: He would go mad in here.

It was not something he feared, at least not as much as he feared other things. He feared that eventually, after years in this cell, there would come a day when he had to leave. If there ever came the day when he would have to look in the mildly smiling face of Steve again, the sad eyes of Bruce or talk to Thor, he did not know what he would do. His other fear was far more short-sighted and a lot easier to be realized.

It just happened one day, probably about 9 days after he had been brought here. Suddenly, the sound of the door being unlocked startled him from his idle staring. He was expecting nobody, it was only a few hours after they had brought breakfast and even though he gave a fuck about this routine, its interruption let his chest tighten in an uncomfortable way.

Two SHIELD agents came in, both carrying a rifle. Their faces remained unmoved while they entered his own small part of hell, in the way people tended to look when they had a mission to complete they were not fully convinced of.

Slowly, Tony got up from the bed, his gaze following the one who disappeared in his bathroom. A few clicking noises were indication enough of what was happening behind the door and the urge to prevent it overwhelmed him for only a second – then his gaze flickered towards the machine gun of the other guy, pointing at his head.

It was ridiculous that he let himself be stopped by the possibility of his death when it was exactly this what he was trying to preserve for himself: the possibility of his death. Brought about by himself, though, at his own volition.

In front of him, the second agent appeared with the mirror in his hands, transporting it out of his cell. Tony felt his nervousness increase, the urge to oppose, but he only clenched his fists, his jaws pressed together tightly.

He knew that this was not over yet and he had guessed rightly: The next second, the agent returned from outside and started rummaging through his stuff.

There was not much to look at, so the job was a quick one. Nevertheless, his heartbeat increased with every feet the man came closer to his bed and surely, his worry was written on his face, because the guy with the machine gun tightened his grip around the trigger.

It took the agent about 20 seconds to discover his pill storage – 20 seconds to take from him what
he had gathered for days now. 20 seconds to take away his peace of mind, the only remaining exit left.

A shiver ran through Tony's body.

When the man turned around, the pills in his closed hand, he threw him a pitying look. Tony wanted nothing more than to spit in his dumb meaningless face. He did not, though, and the agent's attention was back on his partner.

The two of them nodded at each other, then left. With a low thud, the door closed, then the key turned again. He was left alone, the order of his universe reestablished, indurated, unable to ever leave again. His gaze dropped from the locked door down towards his disheveled bed, the mattress half on the floor, when he realized he was holding his breath.

All the bottled up anger released in one savage movement, and he hurled the plastic chair against the wall where crashed and then fell back to the floor, undamaged. The silence around him seemed to explode with the sudden noise, but it was all drowned by the rush of blood from his ears.
It was more than his body was able to do at this moment and so it was screaming in protest, his arm feeling like he was crushed to pieces all over again. An agonized gasp was pressed out of his lips and he let himself fall against the wall, clutching the hurt limb to his chest in a vain attempt for comfort.

It did not need the two agents to run into his cell again, shouting and pointing the gun at him. He could not have done anything at the moment and there was no way he would hurt himself with a chair leg.

What happened next was blurred and only processed under a layer of heated panic and pain, but when he woke up again, he was laying on his mattress and his head felt like cotton wool again.

He was very still for a while, then, his good hand started feeling for the pills. Perhaps it had been a nightmare, an unusual realistic one, one that would deal with something else than the unchangeable past.

His fingers did not feel anything but the rough texture of the mattress.

Tony sighed, then clenched his eyes shut. If he had been running on empty before, now, he was just plain desperate.

He felt a hot tear running down from his eye when the awareness of his situation kicked in and frustration and panic and anger mixed with the knowledge that he was not only alone, but fucking pathetic.

Sighing again, he calmed his breath, trying to escape again in the slumber he had just awoke from.

Dreams and fantasies were last exits remaining – those and... a terrible idea he had not wanted to think about until now.

With nobody else here but himself, he sometimes managed to drift off long enough to actually see something good.

Tony was unsure whether these were the first signs of hallucination or whether his daydreams had just leveled up, but sometimes, he could see Loki sit on his chair, looking at him. Robbed of every other comfort of mind, his sight, be it only a delusion, was the greatest gift.

It only happened for seconds, barely long enough to have a right look at him. He caught his silhouette in the corner of his eye, but when his head whirled around, the chair was always empty.

One time, he did not move when it happened, but kept staring at the ceiling. Without intent, he started concentrating on it, trying to see more without looking at it, but it was impossible to make it real. The only thing left every time was the faint feeling of the other's presence, the smell of his skin lingering in the air.
The Loki visiting him in those daydreams never looked dead or injured. He looked fresh and healthy, wearing clothes Tony did not know on him and had his hair combed and clean. Sometimes, he wore the guards’ clothes, sometimes, Tony just felt a hand on his shoulder when he stood with the back to the wall.

It became more and more confusing, separating reality from those appearances and the appearances from his dreams.

Often enough, he awoke in the middle of the night, covered in sweat and his heart racing with fear. When his pulse started to even out again, he seldom fell back to sleep immediately. Lying there, in the darkness of the room, no noise at all but the ticking of the clock, it became easy to imagine that he was there.

More than once, he was so sure that he could actually feel Loki's presence that he called for him. Silent and full of doubts, his voice sounded like the one of a stranger.

“Loki..?”

It always trailed off into nothingness. Nobody gave him an answer.

Until one night.

It was about three days after the agents had fulfilled their duty to maintain at least his physical well-being.

As always to a certain time, his room was only dimly lit by a small light above the door, a weak attempt of SHIELD to pretend a daily rhythm. Yet, it was not the light that caught his attention after he had woken up once again from an uneasy slumber. His entire body was shivering, as it did so many times, but it could not distract him this time.

He spotted him right beside the door, his gaze resting upon him expectantly.

The last traces of a dream full of fleeing and fighting and yelling and falling fell from him and warmth spread in his chest. Like sleepwalking, Tony slowly moved out of the bed, carefully shoving his legs towards the ground first. He got up, hesitantly, but unable to withstand the attraction, approaching Loki with slow but slightly stumbling steps.

Only when he was asleep, he could look at Loki like that without his form vanishing into nothingness. He savored these moments like nothing he had savored before in his life.

Again, Loki looked different – he looked different every time he reappeared in Tony's mind, yet in some way always the same.

This Loki looked clean and uninjured like the previous ones, yet this time he wore the same clothing he had worn the day they had left for the portal: Steve's ridiculous hoodie which had looked so awfully fitting and unfitting at the same time.

Loki did not move as Tony approached him, but kept staring him directly, not even vanishing as Tony blinked.

“I love you, Tony.”, Loki said, smiling at him, like it was a thing they had used to say frequently.

This had been his last words to Tony, the words he never been able to answer. This time, he could.

“I love you too.”, Tony responded, closing in on the god.

Unable to hold back, his hand stretched out to touch him, to allow himself the last bit of comfort his mind allowed him.

When he blinked the next time, Loki was gone again.
“I love you.”, he repeated to himself as his heart painfully convulsed, his hand reaching out to nothing but air.

“I love you, I love you, I love you...”

Tony's entire body shook as a new and violent wave of desperation overcame him, a desperation so strong that he thought his heart would stop beating and his lungs refuse to work. His knees gave in and he dropped to an ungraceful heap on the floor, still muttering the same three words again and again, eventually resting against the wall, deprived of all strength.

Every time this happened, he felt the life pout out of him like an existing matter, leaving him weaker and weaker every time he had dared to stir a hint of happiness again. He could not do this any longer. It was not a new feeling, it had been there all the time, but contrasted to this cruel show his mind put on for him, it hit him like an epiphany.

He could not do this any longer. Any of this. He had faltered long enough. In the end, it did not come down to the sharp shards of the mirror or the pills hidden under his mattress, but to the one alternative that they had not been able to take from him.

The realization that this was actually possible, that he would do it right now, was elevating to the point of being hysterical, but he did not care.

It was so easy, come to think about it – and he knew what it would feel like. It was a pain that he could estimate.

Had Tony been reluctant about this decision before, there was no hesitation now. Still on the floor, he moved his healthy arm upwards towards his chest, shoving up the dirty shirt he wore. The dark room in front of him was immediately bathed in the blue light of the arc reactor, making the spartan furniture throw strange shadows.

His hands were steady when they took hold of the casing and a new focus had taken over his mind. As if to show him a last time what he was about to miss in the future, his senses seemed sharpened. Fingers slowly stroking over the warm glass surface, he could feel every little bump, every small metallic piece, the smoothness of the glass.

This round little thing was what it had all started with. The blue light and energetic heat reminded him once again of Loki and the way he had ended. Yes, this was what it had all started with – it was only natural to make it end in the same way.

It would not get better for him, he realized that now. This was not hell, but merely purgatory. Just one movement and he could leave, finally finding oblivion.

It was time to find his end, too.

With one well-practiced and determined movement, Tony twisted the Arc-Reactor in his chest. A familiar click, then it was unlocked from its casing, another tug, then he had unplugged the life-saving wire from its encasement.

He leaned his head back against the cool stone wall, waiting for the pain and the feeling of -

Suddenly, he felt how the air filled with a static energy. It vibrated through his reactor first, then jumped over to his entire body, creating goose bumps all over his skin. Warmth and a slight tingle, like an embrace.

It was the best thing he had felt for what seemed like ages.

Watching unmoved, head still resting against the wall, he saw how the air in front of him suddenly started to shimmer with a strange energy like during periods of great heat. Then, a bright light appeared, green and golden. It was only a small spark at first, but spread more and more. Whatever
it was, it was beautiful to look at and reminded Tony of young leaves in spring and warm rays of the sun.

Involuntarily, he felt himself reaching towards it, giving up his slouched position against the wall. The reactor was only loosely in his hand.

The light melted together, creating an intense acidic green. Soon, the whole air crackled, sparks were flying and the the noise of tearing dimensions filled the room. It became brightly white for a second, then it was over.
When the lights receded again, Tony's mind felt as if he had been wiped clean.

Loki stood in front of him, and this time, he did not look like his imagined predecessors.

He looked exhausted, a little bit pale, his hair messy. Tony could not even make out what his clothing was, something vague and dark, but that did not matter anymore.

The only thing that mattered was that Loki was there, looking tired and happy at the same time, his eyes bright with magic – green, not blue – and the air filled with his energy.
He moved forward and knelt down in front of him, his hands grasping Tony's on the reactor, pushing the little device back into its casing in his chest, where it belonged. A shudder ran through his body at the touch, a real touch, not the dissolving of a dream-figure in nothing but emptiness.

“T'm sorry Tony, it took me some time to find you. I never expected them to lock you up, those ungrateful bastards.”

Tony did not know how to react, his mind was in a turmoil. This could not be true, there was just no way. The strategic part of his mind already had a rational explanation on hand: This had to be some kind of hallucination, born from his distress. A gift from his mind, granting him a last bit of relief while his heart stumbled through its last beats.
However, Loki's hand on his felt real, he could feel the magic tingling right beneath the surface.
He smelled the other's scent, stronger than before, a scent of charcoal and pines that gave the impression of small, smoldering fires in ancient forests.

His healthy hand loosened from where they had still been holding the reactor. They knew their way without one second thought, stroking upwards over Loki's body and touching the god's face, just to make sure that he was really there.
It was hard to believe, his brain got caught up in the impossibilities of this to happen to him. But still – this time Loki did not vanish.
He only blinked when Tony's hand tentatively touched the skin under his left eye, the one that had been missing during the last time they had seen each other.

Eventually, Loki's lips spread into a smile, as if he too could only barely believe that he had finally made it.
He moved forward, closing the gap between them and placing a kiss on Tony's slightly opened lips.

At least at this point, Tony did no longer care if any of this was real or not. He felt how his heart slowed down, the contact of another being – of Loki – his scent and warmth soothing him like no tranquilizer could ever do.

When they separated again, Tony's lips curled into a smile as well, the first one since weeks. It was tired and told of exhaustion and pain, but it was genuine, so genuine, that it almost hurt on his face. Loki was smiling, too, and with a gentle tug managed to heave Tony back onto his feet.
“It is time to leave this place.”

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere. There are other worlds, and we no longer need to bother with this one.”
Before he could say anything else or go anywhere, Tony had to say one thing – a thing he should have said ages ago.

“I love you, Loki.”

“I know.”

The god was still close to Tony and his hands were holding onto the inventor's waist, keeping him close. Whatever was going to happen, Tony knew it would be good. He would leave this world behind and discover something new, whatever it might be. As long as Loki was there with him, he did not care where he ended up.

His old life ended here, and a new one began.

Loki's magic engulfed them both, carrying them away into the unknown.

Chapter End Notes

**Trigger warning: Suicide**

Oh my, so that's it!
We can't say how incredibly proud we feel of ourselves that we really pulled this through...it was our biggest project together so far, and took us more than one and half a year.

If you're not exactly sure what the meaning of the end is, it's intended. We had this ending planned even before the story was even published, since we neither wanted a happy ending, it seemed just plainly unfitting, neither did we want to just kill the characters off. Yeah, open ending, free for your own interpretation.
So what do you think does the last scene mean? How do you think did Loki survive?

And we're aware that there is probably potential for at least another 150k words sequel from Steve point, but we won't write that. Summer is coming and we no longer feel like writing deppressing storys...and I have the feeling that a sequel would only do nothing but wear out the story.
Minute of Decay was fun to write, but also incredibly time-consuming and exhausting. We're glad to be done now.
Still, keep your eyes open for one extra chapter...it will be written for one possible ending and probably be posted in a month or so :D (I'm also still working on an
illustration for melting Tesseract!Loki from chapter 57, hopefully I can get it finished until then)
We're also going to work over a few chapters and edit them, especially the clumsily written first ones.

And if you have read the story to this point, we would be very thankful for you to leave a kudos, if you haven't done that so far. We think it's only fair (let's see if we can hit the 1000 mark! :D)

Thank you so much for reading, your kind comments and support. You really made writing this story even more fun.

Until next time!

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