Losing the Plot

by BC_Brynn

Summary

In return for Tony’s spur-of-the-moment help in battle, Loki offers sanctuary. And guidance. Tony may or may not be going mad and the world may be ending soon, but the Avengers still refuse to give up on him.

Notes

So, I was talking to myself: ‘Self, one of your main Avengers ships is FrostIron, but you haven’t actually published any FrostIron yet. Self, write yourself a FrostIron. It will be good for your soul. Here’s a fairly original idea – haven’t seen that before.’ So I started writing, and then both Loki and Tony decided that, ugh, not shagging that guy… so, mentor-fic, anyone?

Regarding timeline – I’m thinking 2015. MCU canon up to and including The Avengers, plus the parts of Iron Man 3 and CA:WS I like, and some parts of Thor 2 that I don’t like yet were nonetheless useful (Frigga lives!). Tony has Extremis, but he also kept the arc reactor.

The story is already written, and will be updated more or less regularly.
(detailed warnings are in the end note)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Thor turned up after the London thing with an expression that was probably supposed to be regal contrition, but fell much closer to a kicked starving puppy.

“My friends,” he said, holding Mjölnir in both hands like a magical artifact variation of a security blanket. “It pains me to take my leave, and yet such was the bargain I struck with my Father.”

“Did you get grounded?” Tony asked absently, since the majority of his mental faculties were focused on determining what the Avengers would have to compensate for in their resident demi-god’s absence, how they could compensate for it, if they should start recruiting (Sam Wilson was fitting in reasonably well, maybe bringing in other people wouldn’t be horrible?) and pouring without spilling.

The last got a bit harder after two nights without sleep and half a bottle of – what was he drinking again? – some kind of Slavic liquor. Not Russian. Weird. How did that bottle get here?

He automatically filtered out the various subverbal protests to his flippancy, as well as Steve’s imploring ‘Tony, please…’ and narrowed his eyes in Thor’s direction.

For all that professed pain, he looked pretty happy.

“Nay, Tony. For what may sound to you like punishment, to me is in deed a much desired boon.” Thor practically glowed. He held the Hammer idly in one hand and gestured expansively with the other. “The Allfather was greatly displeased with the cowardly acts of Malekith, but he found my actions in defense of Asgard worthy of notice. Perhaps that is why he chose to listen to my pleas. Or perhaps it was Loki’s voice bending his ear.”

Steve smiled, benevolently encouraging the entity hundred times older than himself. “That is great news. But how does it result in you getting-” Grounded, he almost said, Tony could damn well see it in his face. “-restricted from the team?”

Wow, Steve. If he backpedalled any harder, the whole couch would have been moving backwards.

“We struck a bargain most honorable,” Thor explained. “The Allfather states that it is past the highest time for me to learn the ways of the court – to which, granted, I have never paid much attention. One may say that my mind tends to… ah…”

“I hear you, buddy,” agreed Clint. He glanced sideways at Natasha, who provided an almost discreet supportive physical contact. “Our handler used to stick us in seminars as punishment. Sexual harassment, anger-management, bullying, you name it, we’ve slept through it. Repeatedly.” He ended on a slightly choked-off note, so obviously Coulson was the vindictive nanny he meant.

Tony viciously squashed the itchy, burning sensation in his chest that made him want to take a baseball bat to something fragile.

“Your tale fills my heart with dread,” Thor assured him with a cutely failed attempt at sarcasm.

The Avengers were definitely a bad influence on him – and that was saying something, since the guy had spent centuries in Loki’s vicinity.
“There is no need to pity me, though,” the prince continued, “for in return I have been allowed to bring my beloved Jane to my court once it is established, so we may begin our learnings alongside one another. She shall one day be a fair and just Queen to Asgard.”

Tony had really, really strong doubts regarding Thor’s last statement – and going by the expression, Bruce had some as well – but Steve was nodding supportively, and Tony figured out that Dr Foster was badass enough to fight this battle for herself.

He just hoped that someone would record it, so he could enjoy watching it… after the space dust settled.

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Tony clapped his shoulder and toasted him. “Send me an invite to the wedding, Ziggy Stardust; I want a closer look at that rainbow bridge thingy of yours-”

Then Steve was shouldering him out of the way and offering congratulations, followed by Wilson and then by Bruce. Clint said something dirty that Tony would have usually found hilarious, but he was a little too busy trying to catch Natasha’s eye.

Something was rotten in the state of Asgard.

Tony had heard and read enough about Odin to know that this wasn’t his style. The jerk-off had once refused to let Foster step foot into Asgard, and when it inevitably happened, wanted to kill her. He wouldn’t have changed his mind, much less this easily. It might have been a tests? Gods were usually big on tests. Odin had thousand other, cheaper things that didn’t compromise his pride which he could have used as leverage if he really wanted Thor to stay at home and study how to be a good house-ruler…

…and Tony was increasingly more convinced that Odin had no intentions of passing the throne to his son. In fact, Odin probably liked his position of nigh-on all-power enough to cling to it until he was dead and cremated.

Thor was incapable of bargaining even on the most basic level, so this solution hadn’t come from his head.

No, this stank of a Loki plot. Tony hadn’t believed in the news of Loki’s death. Not for a second, no matter how shattered Thor had looked for all of two minutes (before someone had mentioned Jane Foster’s name). He did happily crow his ‘I told you so’ when Thor brought the news of Loki’s miraculous survival.

Natasha finally acknowledged Tony’s stare. She infinitesimally narrowed her eyes, and then looked in Thor’s direction. There was a bit of tension around her mouth. But she didn’t say anything, and didn’t even glance at Tony again.

Thor left that night.

And, for a week, things were quiet.

Some time after this confrontation, Tony started losing the plot. Not allegorically, which would have been pretty bad in his opinion, never mind that Pepper – and a few million other people – had been accusing him of it for years. The problem, Tony feared, was worse.
He was tangibly losing the plot.

If his life were a storyline, he would have had to say that the characters had started acting out of character, the plot-devices way too often amounted to *deus ex machina* (*deus ex Asgard*, to be precise, but that was neither here nor there) and aside from the many and varied plotholes what worried him most was the lack of consistency.

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(About a year of too much fucking happening later) Tony couldn’t really get away from JARVIS, that was the whole point of JARVIS, only maybe if he got kidnapped by the Ten Rings again, and he’d really rather not, because that way lay waterboarding and he wasn’t all that fond of any water-related activities, lately. Not a feature he looked for on his *Fun Things to Do on Your Vacation to the Middle East* pamphlet. Sort of a been-there, done-that, got the t-shirt thing, only instead of a t-shirt he had the arc reactor, t-shirts were lame, everybody could have a t-shirt, he was Tony Stark, keep up here.

But Tony was drinking today, and that meant getting away from JARVIS the mother hen – he couldn’t deal with breaking Jay’s little silicon heart, he couldn’t, he loved Jay, he wished he were a better dad than his dad – it was a curse.

He had chucked his phone and driven to this backwater watering hole and someone grabbed his upper arm and whoops-

Why was he standing in his living room again?

“These are much more fitting surroundings for a negotiation, wouldn’t you agree?” asked a smarmy voice.

Tony inclined his head and checked out the speaker, from his toes – half-inch heel, tall boots, sexy – to the top of his head – black hair slicked back like he didn’t want to show the world how adorably it curled when let free.

This was his green fairy? Not that it wasn’t funny, or even right in a politically very incorrect way, what with the color and the eyes and the magic and, thinking of it, the way mythology claimed he liked to get fucked by dick.

“I was promised Kylie Minogue, and instead I got this,” Tony grumbled, inclining his head in the direction of the fairy.

“It is a crying pity the way you persist in destroying your brain,” the fairy replied, ignoring the real issue at hand in favor of berating Tony for his absolutely expectable reaction to post-traumatic stress.

“Alcohol,” Tony said to the bottle in the cradle of his elbow, feeling injured, “you have betrayed me.”

The fairy raised an eyebrow and tried to look amused. Failed. It plucked the bottle out of Tony’s tender hold and walked off with a declaration: “I shall be taking that.”

Tony threw himself after the thieving supernatural creature, but he must have been more inebriated than he thought, because he missed by a mile, stumbled, and crashed into the carpet. Fortunately he was very rich, so the carpet was very soft.

He rolled onto his back and squinted upwards at a pale face that stared down at him with a too
damn Pepper-like mixture of mocking and pity. Sod them both, Pepper and the green fairy.

“What do you want?” Tony grumbled, contemplating the various scientific points of view on the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to sit up.

“The drink which you offered me and yet never provided,” the green fairy replied, and extended his hand.

Tony took it. His genius mind seemed to consider it the by far most efficient available method of attaining verticality.

“And?” he asked as a hand on his shoulder steadied him, and then shoved and pushed him all the way into the soft, warm embrace of his couch. He liked that hand. He wouldn’t have minded keeping it, but the green fairy took it back, and Tony had to admit that it was probably a good decision on the fairy’s part, because he would have looked silly with only one hand. Much better with both. Then there was one that could steer drunk people around and one for holding that long-ass javelin. Spear. Thing.

Where had he put the bottle again?

“Ask not what you can offer me,” the fairy declaimed like a Shakespearean actor – it was probably a spear, then, Tony decided, proud of his ability to find contextual clues. Unfortunately he wasn’t that quick at finding any other clues, and the speech sounded way too complicated for the amount of alcohol in his blood. “Ask what I can offer you, and what you are willing to do in recompense.”

“No negotiating with terrorists. That’s a thing, right? Say it’s a thing – I can’t take it if the TV’s lying to me…”

The green fairy laughed, for once without a trace of mockery, slightly surprised, as though the laughter had been punched out of him. He forced the instance of genuine amusement away swiftly, and then said: “That is the philosophy your government proclaims. I never took you for one to march to anyone’s fife.”

Tony remained silent for a long time. A plethora – a myriad – of possible wishes to wish crossed his mind and evaporated into the New York night. He wanted Pepper back. He wanted the shrapnel out of his body and his health restored. He wanted absolution for the years of warmongering done in his name. He wanted…

“Genie, genie… that time I saved the world,” he breathed eventually, then bent over the side-arm of the couch and threw up on his very expensive, very soft carpet. “Can you erase it from my memory?”

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The not so funny fact was that he remembered, in hindsight, when it had started.

It had started at the same time as his now infamous return to heavy drinking.
There was a baby.

The other Avengers were fighting the tentacle monsters of the dungeon dimensions or whatever the uglies were, summoned by alien flunkies just because why not?, and their shouting and calm reporting and cool orders relayed over the comms faded into background noise, and from there into static, because Tony’s brain had to switch several gears at once and a lot of the usual sensory input got scrambled in the process.

There was a baby. It was a chubby little thing, naked except for a diaper – cloth, not plastic, how very environmentally conscious of the evil of the week – and blue-eyed like… well, like a few of the innocent and pure-hearted people Tony knew.

“I wonder,” a bitterly amused voice said somewhere near Tony and, funny thing, Tony understood even though that sure as fuck wasn’t English, “if you would cease to surprise me if I started expecting it of you.”

“Hasn’t worked for Pepper. Or Rhodey,” Tony’s mouth replied on autopilot, while his mind was spinning so fast that it was probably soon going to overheat and crash.

There was a blue-eyed baby in the epicenter of that fucking mess instead of the doomsday machine he had expected and, no, Tony wasn’t stupid, he wasn’t easily distracted either, the baby was the doomsday machine.

Fucking fuck.

A naked, blue-eyed, pure-hearted doomsday machine – why was he thinking of Loki, now? Something was rotten in the state of- wait, Loki. Distraction. Loki was not the distraction. But he was a doomsday machine. And he was-

“My mental faculties considerably outstrip those of your mortal pets.”

-here.

Holy son of a God. Or a Frost Giant. Or both, come to think of it.

It was a good thing that Tony was here. A very good thing. Of the Avengers, he and Natasha were the only ones capable of saving the day, and Natasha still thought Loki was unambiguously bad news, while Tony accepted that Loki was the herald of bad news in the hopes that someone would act before everything went to shit more often than he was the instigator of the shit.

Which was why Tony pulled one of the shiny-handled dagger-sword things from the scabbard at Loki’s belt – faster than he knew he could, fast enough even that Loki just hadn’t expected it and stopped him – and swung.

You ever seen a baby beheaded?

Now Tony had.

He froze with the dagger in his hand, dripping genteel little drops of red blood, fuckers would make it red, just for the mindfuck, and looked up. Fuck, he was going to have nightmares like never before. Fucking fuck.
Loki stood opposite him, visibly flabbergasted. Funny word, flabbergasted. But Loki was, with eyes wide and blood draining from his face until he was pale as a ghost and getting a weird bluish tinge that had nothing to do with Jotnar genetics and he should have probably tried to breathe.

“I did not expect that,” Loki said dryly, and then snickered a bit. Hysteria ala God of Lies.

Tony kind of wanted to join him, except laughing after killing a baby was levels above just killing a baby on the evil scale, so he did not. Also, he might have gone a mite catatonic. This line of business probably didn’t agree with him.

Then someone kicked the double door in, and Tony only had about half a second to realize what it looked like – he and Loki, and he holding that dagger with the dripping blood and a decapitated fucking baby lying on the cot in front of them and-

Loki reached out and they were gone.

Tony woke up in an unfamiliar place, and concluded that he had actually gone properly catatonic, and someone had had the mercy, or the lack of patience, to knock him the fuck out. Lights on while no one was home were just a waste of energy, so right, again, very environmentally conscious of the evil.

He needed a bathroom and then a drill through the brain-

Oh. He blinked and looked around. It didn’t seem like bathroom was an option. He was lying on top of fur that looked like it was real – Pepper would have had conniptions – and there was a lot of stone décor inside the room, only it wasn’t décor so much as real stone. There was a fire in the center of the room, which mostly consisted of red-hot embers; a green carafe provided light – because apparently that made sense in the weird-ass reality Tony now inhabited.

The green light flickered a little, and it was very pretty, but Tony’s aching head and roiling stomach hated it.

With his eyes screwed shut and expending what he considered superhuman effort, Tony managed to sit up.

“I have to go like you wouldn’t believe,” he announced to the air. “Don’t think I won’t piss in here-”

“That would be poor conduct of a guest,” replied a disembodied voice, which for Tony was par for the course, he just didn’t expect other people to have their own A.I. butlers. He was a big fan of A.I. butlers.

Only, well, stone room, fur bed – not really the kind of abode one expected to be filled with sensors and speakers.

Then again – he glanced at the carafe that kept emitting soft green light – maybe it ran on magic.

The mere word made him want to break out in hives.

“Out the door and to the left,” said the magic butler.

Twenty minutes later Tony had gone through the whole place – all three rooms and a terrace above a drop. Tony tried to estimate its depth by chucking a stone statuette of some kind of fugly horned
animal over the railing, but he didn’t hear it hit the ground, so that was a bust. With the utter absence of anything even remotely electronic, Tony was seriously considering that he might not be able to get out of this place on his own. Whether he was able to contact anyone was up in the air at the moment.

On the plus side, breakfast awaited him in the room that was not the bedroom, and aside from the woeful lack of alcohol, he couldn’t think of a single complaint.

“This is the nicest kidnapping I’ve ever been the victim of,” he mentioned over a piece of what he tentatively identified as smoked fish.

“Your praise warms my heart,” replied someone that definitely shouldn’t be there.

Tony blinked, but the mirage didn’t disappear. It walked through the table – hologram? No, wait, magic, so a goddamn astral projection – and stopped in front of the pane of ice that served instead of glass for the window.

“Although you mistake your situation—”

“You took me away without my consent,” Tony pointed out, “and now you’re holding me in a place I can’t get out of. We Midgardians call that kidnapping. No offense if that’s a cultural thing; it’s just that we’re big on consent.”

A ghost of a smile passed over Loki’s face, but disappeared almost immediately. “You did me a service,” he stated. “Unasked for, but not unappreciated, regardless of what your true intentions were. In destroying the Seed—”

It all came flooding back – tentacle monsters, some stupid Lovecraftian humor, Bruce’s sniggers turning into Hulk’s low, excited growl and Cap insisting that he ‘understood that reference’ (yeah, that had become a thing, since Cap could take it almost as good as he could dish it out). Hawkeye passed intel on an unexpected sighting of Loki, but that didn’t make sense to Tony, because he thought he had the handle on Loki’s crazy, and this world-rending, mankind-razing scheme was realms away from his usual MO.

And then there was a baby.

He shuffle-ran to the closet and emptied his stomach into what passed for the toilet.

He needed that drill, post haste.

God – shit – fuck-

“This is not an abduction, Anthony Stark,” Loki’s voice said with terrible nonchalance. “This is an offer of sanctuary.”

“Can I refuse?” Tony inquired, and mostly he was seeing that- that- the moment as his arm just reached out and stole the dagger and raised up and came down and those tiny little red droplets just fell to the floor with a quiet tap-tap-tap-

“If that is your genuine wish,” Loki replied wearily.

When Tony chanced glancing up, he met a pair of green eyes looking at him with some second cousin twice-removed of empathy. Some distant disliked relative of understanding. Quite a bit of pity, too, but Tony was used to people looking at him with pity.
If nothing else, that was what made him believe that the offer of sanctuary was genuine.

“What’s going on outside?”

Loki turned away. “A court of law – two of them, as a matter of fact. One on Midgard, one on Asgard. You have become yet more famous than you used to be.”

It was an ideal opportunity for boasting, but no boasts came to mind. Tony was proud; even after Afghanistan he was proud of his creations, of his accomplishments, even as he knew he had fucked up royally and his karma would never get in the black again and he would be reincarnated as a helminth or something. Now he just felt like a candidate for the axe. He could make a tour of Hell and shake hands with Herod and Solomon. No, wait, Solomon had backed out of the baby-murder-

“Stark.”

He shook his head. He hadn’t been this messed up since… huh, probably since he had nuked the Chitauri and died to freefall through a wormhole.

“Your mind wanders. Left to your own devices, you shall drive yourself to madness.”

“Might be nice,” Tony admitted. “Madness couldn’t feel any worse than this.”

Loki sighed. “You would be surprised.”

But he did leave. Or, well, he did cancel the astral projection.

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“Loki?”

It wouldn’t have been the first hallucination Tony’s had since he had been locked up in this place. His mind was used to constant stimulation, with periods of overstimulation. Here, he was bored to tears.

Literally. He had had several crying jags, and screaming fits, and mostly oscillated between lucid dreams and pretending to write a code inside his head and hearing Pepper’s voice that changed into his Mother’s voice and then his Father’s and then Obadiah’s and people were laughing as he was dying-

Whoops, that was an actual memory. Again.

The cold felt like the only real thing left in the world, and at this point the abyss had stopped looking just attractive and became the shining light at the end of his tunnel.

The apparition momentarily distracted Tony enough that he decided not to throw himself over the railing for the next two minutes. It came closer and examined the long scratches and cuts running down Tony’s right forearm.

That was nothing. On the left one, he had figured out how to write with the shards of some doohickey he had smashed in one of his fits.

Pain felt a little bit real, but the fucker sneaked in everywhere, and then everything hurt and it felt like normal and just a part of his fever dream.
Babies don’t normally talk, right? No, especially not when they don’t have heads-

Someone snapped their fingers in front of Tony’s face.

Tony blinked.

Loki-mirage. Huh.

“I bear news,” the illusion said. “News of Midgard – of the Avengers.”

“Yeah?” Tony looked at his forearm. He had carved it in code, and then tried to forget the code so he could figure it out later, like a game, because a game was something he could think about, and he needed to think, so he tried to make it hard.

The first line of symbols translated as ‘Tony Stark’. He still hadn’t forgotten his name.

Fuck, he wished Loki wanted him to build a Jericho. He hadn’t realized that a cave in Afghanistan full of terrorists trying out their torture techniques on him could become a fond memory with the right application of stimuli deprivation.

Tony wondered if he was lightheaded. If he was concussed. If he was hungry. There was plenty of food, but he wasn’t good at tracking his intake. When had he last eaten? JARVIS would know.

“Jarvis?”

But there was only Loki’s magical butler, which, now that Tony thought about it, was probably just an imprint of Loki anyway, and he knew nothing about magic but he had wasted some time trying to imagine how it worked and given himself a migraine.

A migraine would have been okay with him, except for the part where his mind dredged up old nursery rhymes and sang it at him in toddlers’ voices and he just wanted everything to stop. Everything.

Shit, how long had it taken him to completely fall apart? Three days? Five?

“Is it Monday yet? I’ve got a press conference.” He had promised Pepper. He wouldn’t have remembered normally, but he had nothing to do here but remember.

“A month has passed on Earth,” Loki replied. “This realm’s cycles differ from those of your planet. I shall share my news, provided you come inside.”

Loki had once invaded Earth. Good times.

“I like it here,” Tony replied. He was beginning to feel warm. It was nice.

“Finding comfort in discomfort. Your people call that masochism, do they not? Or is that merely a misguided form of penance in your case?”

“I’m weighing the pros and cons of chucking myself over the railing,” Tony said with brutal, uncharacteristic honesty. Last time he was half this honest with someone, he had been dying. Huh. That seemed pretty apropos.

“What is it about this particular death at your hands that makes it so difficult for you to accept?”

He thought he might try for deadpan. In the end, the ‘pan’ somehow evaporated into the gelid air. “Gee. I wonder.”
“They chose a form for the Seed that would protect it best,” expounded Loki-mirage, cool as the air, literally, because that was what he consisted of. “They chose well. It does not mean that you slew a human infant. Ontvættir would come at you wearing the face of the person dearest to you. It is mimicry – deception. Why would you succumb to it now when you did not before?”

He seemed genuinely bemused by the notion. As if that was the important part. Tony was f***ed-up as all Hell, but if he looked at it from the right point of view, he could admit that it was a good thing he woke up vomiting from dreams about murdering little children. Considering that the alternative would be him being fine with those dreams… yeah, he’d take a bit of vomit.

His throat burned all the time now.

Loki looked about ready to hurl, too, although in him it seemed to be due to illness. He had always been pale as a corpse, but now he was bluish. Was he cold?

Tony wasn’t cold. Not anymore.

With mild annoyance, Loki flicked a stray strand of hair out of his eyes. “Come inside, Stark, ere you freeze and all my magnanimity shall be wasted upon your miserable existence. I vow that I shall carry the tale of your ignominious death to the Avengers, and henceforth all shall know you as the Stark-sicle. I believe the Captain will find it humorous.”

Tony pouted. “That’s cruel and unusual.”

“I do have my standards.”

He screamed when Loki grabbed him and dragged him inside the domicile. He wasn’t sure what hurt so much and why, but the pain was momentarily all-encompassing.

He finally managed to blink some of the white spots out of his eyes to find himself reclining on a chaise, with his feet and hands in water that should have steamed like crazy judging by how hot it felt. It must have been boiling. Tony found immediately that he was spellbound and couldn’t remove any of his limbs from their respective bowls.

He gritted his teeth; he should have expected the torture.

He should have taken his swan dive when he had the chance. This was what he got for dithering. Yeow-yeow-yeow-yeowch.

“Stop struggling!” his torturer hissed.

There was green light, and muttering in some scandiwegian gobbledygook, and the pain gradually lessened, until it reached Tony’s baseline, and then continued lessening. He felt a bit like he was waking up, only to notice that he was absolutely exhausted, way past running on fumes, barely up to lying there and breathing and keeping his eyes open.

Incidentally, Loki-mirage maybe was actual Loki at the moment. Tony wasn’t sure how he should be able to tell.

“You are a fool,” Loki said then, seating himself regally on a chair that wasn’t nearly ornate enough for divine royalty. “The Allfather shall be the arbiter of your sentence; any preemptive punishment you inflict upon yourself is unjust and unlawful.”

Tony imagined himself giving the space wizard an evil eye. It remained abstract, because his face wasn’t playing ball. He was positively shocked when he managed to find the energy to talk,
although he was pretty sure other people wouldn’t be surprised at all (right, Pepper?). Similarly, other people wouldn’t be surprised by the fact that he also managed to insert his foot into his mouth.

“You ever dream about Odin killing you?”

Loki didn’t smite him for the question. More the pity. Or not. After all, the conversation had just taken an interesting turn. The suicidal ideation could go grab a ten minute break. Bathroom, coffee, cigarette, and back to work.

“No,” the maybe-god said calmly, and smiled. It was terrifying. And kind of sad. “I do not dream of mercy, Stark. I have long since given up the hope for it.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“I told you already – it is a debt I owe, and I settle my debts.”

“Can that involve some booze?” Tony inquired promptly.

On his way out, Loki dashed that hope with a disgusted and definitive: “No.”

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Tony didn’t know how long it was until Loki came back; he just knew that in the meantime he had eaten, puked it up, and eaten again, and gone a little crazier and still not killed himself.

He felt a little better by the time his so-designated haven of utter mind-rapeing boredom was invaded by his utter pillock of a gracious host, but that had probably a lot, lot more to do with Loki’s magic than with the nourishment and sleep.

“Your vengeful friends are clamoring to have you returned to them,” Loki said, not bothering with any of the polite bullshit. He seemed almost optimistic as he sat down to the table and poured himself a full goblet of the sparkling-juice-like stuff Tony had been drinking.

Whatever it was, it was tragically nonalcoholic.

“When the Ontvættir’s deception was recognized, your Captain spoke of it in detail to the media. It appears that his good word is indeed all one needs to be absolved in the face of Midgardian public.”

“Whereas on Asgard it is Odin’s good word,” Tony quipped. Some days more than others it felt like Pepper was right, and he didn’t actually have any control over his mouth.

“Indeed,” Loki replied instead of committing violence.

Too bad. Tony thought with melancholia back on the times when the guy could be riled with just a drop of Thor’s or Odin’s name. Those had been better times. Not good, exactly, but better than now. He huffed and rolled over to his side, so he could watch the blizzard going on outside the windows.

“You need not fear prosecution on Midgard,” Loki added after a short contemplation.

“How many hits has the vid got on YouTube?” Tony inquired sardonically. He was sure someone had managed to obtain and leak the footage. It would have been the first interesting thing people had managed to get on him since his sex videos scandals had become yawn-inducing to the gossip-
mongers.

“What makes you think I would know such a thing?” Loki retorted, noncommittal like a professional, which Tony had to respect even though it made him want to claw out the smirky bastard’s eyes. Yeah, media. Piranhas. Fickle public. Life of a smart, rich, powerful, famous, good-looking white man was hard.

He and Loki would both know.

“No, not buying it. You’re exactly the type to love YouTube and spend hours on it. You’re not the cat videos type, though. Or maybe? Are there rabid cats? Do cats get rabies? I think you’d like piranha videos if they exist. Ha! In fact, I bet you have a whole playlist of them.” He was imagining Steve with cat ears and tail standing in front of a sea writhing with piranhas, all teeth and microphones, and talking about how that guy they tolerated on the Avengers because he was rich and gave them toys for free had gone and gotten himself kidnapped by Loki, but everything was okay, because it wasn’t like anybody would actually miss him? Though if he came back there would be new, better toys, so maybe people could stop clamoring for the electrical chair, ain’t it swell, gosh, golly, dang, oh dear me…

“I did warn you of the madness,” Loki mentioned conversationally. “You persist in not taking me seriously.”

“Don’t take it personally, Harry Potter.” Tony waved his hand. Loki’s magic, he was sure, that was it – that was what made him feel high. He liked it. Even though he couldn’t stop thinking and talking nonsense. It was some potent stuff. “I don’t actually take anything seriously. Except Pepper. Pepper’s serious business.” Not that even this attitude had helped him keep her happy and satisfied in a relationship with him. He was honestly amazed that they had managed to salvage their friendship.

Aw. And now he was sad.

Loki sighed, and possibly rolled his eyes too; Tony wasn’t sure, he hadn’t been watching.

“Have you had your fill of madness yet?”

“I’d say!” Tony exclaimed, anger replacing sadness lightning-fast yet somehow fluidly, so that the change didn’t jar him. And exhaustion came on its tail, suddenly there, dragging Tony down into a dark grey pit of leaden weight and mental sluggishness. “Can you get me math puzzles? Or a tablet?” Numbers made everything better, and that was an axiom, so he didn’t need to bother to try and prove it.

“I can do better than that.” Loki stood and slid a leather-bound book on top of the table. “I wished to provide you with sanctuary. It took me some time to devise a way for you to be safe inside your own head.”

“Does this make me a mewling schlorg?”

Loki froze for a split second and then burst into full-body laughter, hard and side-busting, head thrown back and eyes scrunched.

“…you are precious.”

“Yeah, yeah, Gollum,” Tony returned in lieu of goodbye, and completely stunned himself when he realized that one side on his mouth was lifted in what might have seemed to a casual observer to be a smile.
Huh.

He dragged himself off the chaise and drank the rest of the sparkling juice in Loki’s goblet. He fancied he could feel traces of magic on it. A part of him went *ew, indirect kiss*… but the rest was far too fascinated with the book to pay it any attention.

Loki must have been even crazier than Tony had privately suspected, because he had just offered Tony a magic primer.

Tony woke up in a huge meadhall filled with aggressively beautiful and just aggressive people.

Well, no, that wasn’t really fair. He had been in and out of his head for days, or weeks, or however that translated to real time, or not really real, they were both real – he was still irritated that he didn’t have enough data to calculate the relative-speed-of-time and length-of-day discrepancies between Loki’s vacation house on the cliff of icy death and Earth. For however long it took to do the whole trial in absentia, he had been secluded with nothing but a book to learn his magical ABCs from.

He did learn. It bent his perception of reality, and left him in a sort of half-there state, similar to what he experienced during his blackout engineering binges, but much longer lasting than what he was used to.

He had been thus-conscious when Loki had come for him.

It was only now, surrounded by ostensibly unfriendly Asgardians, that something in his mind snapped and the fog-like haziness of disconnection from the outside world disappeared.

“Hi,” he said, and lifted his hand in a parody of wave.

The big, bearded, one-eyed man lounging on the throne looked down at him expressionlessly.

The woman standing behind the throne and to the right tried (but not very hard) to hide a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

Oops, Tony mused, wondering why the Hell he shouldn’t be finding this entire three-ring circus utterly ridiculous.

“Thank you for your magnanimity, Allfather,” Loki said, polite on the surface, but with an eloquent undercurrent of two-raised-fingers, fuck you very much, still can shoot a magic arrow into your ass the second you turn your back on me.

Odin the supreme overlord of self-proclaimed gods scowled. Harder. “I was led to believe that your sole role in today’s proceedings would be that of an eyewitness, Loki-”

He made sure to sound out the cut-off there at the end, to remind everyone present that Loki used to be called by another name, too, and now wasn’t, and everyone in this fucking vast hall was right now thinking about the fact that Lokes wasn’t really the product of Odin’s own loins, and had been disinherited upon his first public fuck-up.

The fingers of Loki’s left hand moved, barely perceptibly, as though he were striking invisible vertical xylophone bars with his knuckles. The only reason Tony noticed was that he was standing a little too close (intimidated by the crowd of aliens? who? he?) and Loki’s middle finger came into brief contact with the hair on Tony’s forearm.
The almost-contact left behind a faint sizzle of transferred magic. Another hit. Like a battery, charging the mortal.

In fact, Tony felt more connected than usual, and that – he was pretty sure – was the effect of Loki’s magic. The guy was leaking it, not quite all over the place, but wherever he lingered, or intentionally touched things, or gave his attention fully to a subject. Tony, as an intermittent subject of Loki’s focus, felt each encounter like a kick.

“I am here, indeed, to confirm what I witnessed – and what I already described to this court repeatedly, Allfather,” Loki said, all injured dignity and dutiful humbleness. Like anyone would believe that face. “And yet the truth is dangerous in the hands of those who do not know how to handle it. I would not see it wielded in an attack on the man whom my witness was meant to defend.”

The Lady behind the throne – heh, talk about allegory – smiled, very briefly, but all the more resonantly.

“I have heard whispers—” Loki turned slightly on the spot, not looking at anyone in particular, but vaguely suggesting a group of medieval-posh courtiers. “—of how easy it would be to twist the events and make your people question the mortals’ grasp of morality, and of duty.”

Tony wished, out of blue and yet hard enough to leave him breathless for a moment, that he and Loki would one day have an opportunity to sit down, get just tipsy enough to relax, and talk up a storm about the difference of mentality, culture and social structures between Earth and Asgard – and perhaps any other place Loki had been to for a long enough stretch to form an opinion. He thought that would be almost as much fun as science-binging with Bruce.

Oh, Bruce. Tony hadn’t seen him in… how long again?

“You have ever been finely attuned to register the quietest of whispers,” Odin said, half a compliment and half an accusation.

“A prince has the obligation to fight for justice as well as he can – be it with swords or words or the words of others.”

A wave of susurrus rose and fell over the hall after that proclamation. Loki became the undisputed centre of attention; within an instant everyone stopped caring about the mortal who was the official cause of the entire gathering, and they all jumped all over the family drama like middle-aged housewives spotting an Argentinean soap opera.

Loki smiled at his adoptive parents, sharp and brittle. “You were enviable teachers, and many, indeed, envied me the privilege of your teachings. I am learning to see the lines – and here, King of Asgard, stands a man who is determined a hero not by his boast, but by his sacrifice.”

Tony was lost in observing the crowd and their mixed reaction to their ex-prince’s combative statement, so it took him far too long to retrace the path of conversation and arrive at the surprising realization that Loki had actually been talking about him. What the deep-frozen Hell?

He checked the tall, tall windows for any sign of pigs flying outside. Come to think of it, maybe that sort of thing was normal on Asgard? There were none, though. Some kind of bright blue bird glided by the hall and disappeared.

Tony turned back to the throne and looked into Odin’s frowning face.

“Be at peace, Loki,” ordered the resident head honcho, “your battle has been won already, and all
know you to be victorious – you have no need for reassurance in this matter.”

It was quite masterful, Tony had to admit, how that guy reassured, encouraged and then slammed down his supposed kid in one sentence. Creative. What an asshole dad. Even Howard hadn’t been really that much of an artist about it.

Howard had been more with the silences and the Janus-like about-face between public effusive approval and private acrimonious disapproval of Tony. Being burned like this in public…

Well, no wonder Loki hadn’t taken it personally when people called him a mass-murderer.

“Would kinda like to see how Thor reacts to this,” he muttered.

Loki must have heard him, judging by his minute flinch, but nobody else seemed to.

Nevertheless, the mumble attracted Alldaddy’s attention to Tony himself.

The guy stood up, regally, but also like he had a backache, and by the way he was leaning on his spear for more than just decorative purposes, that might have even in fact been the case.

“Anthony Stark of Midgard,” he spoke uber-formally, “in the days past, thine actions were explained before this Court, and the Court has awarded thou full acquittal for the crimes of which thou stood accused. We hear that the same decision was reached by the courts of Midgard.”

That was one headache averted. Pepper would be glad. If he ever got back to her, of which he still wasn’t entirely sure.

As though he could read Tony’s thoughts – sadly not an impossible case – the god king proclaimed: “I only have one question for you, Anthony Stark… of Midgard.”

“Yes… uh, sir?” Tony blinked upwards, scratching at the corner of his by now pretty impressive beard and still feeling somewhat removed from the situation.

“Why take that blade from Loki’s hand and add such weight to your own conscience?”

Sometimes Tony wished his mouth didn’t run away from him. Sometimes he, frankly, couldn’t be bothered to give a fuck. Sometimes he wanted to stab himself in the face. Like when he said: “Because him you would have executed without stopping to think about why he did it.”

x

Tony drank from his horn, which sounded unexpectedly dirty and made him wonder if there was something wrong with his head that it insisted on jumping to the most Freudian interpretation available, but then he thought, well duh. Of course something was wrong with his head. Lots of things, in fact.

Maybe this very alcoholic drink with its legendary alcohol content that could leave Thor plastered and even help Steve let his hair down for a little while… maybe this could help right him. Two wrongs could make a right, he was sure. It sounded mathematically sound to him.

Maybe it would kill him. He didn’t exactly actively want to die at the moment, but he was fucking tired – one fucking tired, insomniac, PTSD-ing baby-murderer. Yippie.

Tony hadn’t known that the green fairy lived in Asgardian mead, too. But it apparently did, because it was standing at the corner of the army-sized dinner table and thoughtfully examining
“Didn’t know you lived here,” Tony noted. He took another sip. The mead was sweet, and made him feel like he was maybe a less wretched being than he really was. It wasn’t a good feeling, but still mostly better than sobriety. Now if he could only make his stomach stop swimming around in his belly.

Maybe have it excised? Did he even need it for anything? It wasn’t like he ate most days, anyway. He could install an IV in the suit; that could work-

“Yes, you did,” said the green fairy, patently unamused.

“What?” Tony had lost the thread of that conversation.

The fairy sighed. It sat up on the edge of the table right in front of Tony, blocking his access to more of the sweet, sweet mead, and pursed its mouth. “If you do not stop this behavior, I shall humiliate you into stopping it.”

Tony snorted. “You’d miss me if I dried out, Tinker Bell.”

The fairy scowled.

Tony took another swig out of his horn, and sometime soon after must have blacked out, because that was the last hallucination he remembered.
“Oh my god!”

The shrill voice woke Tony up from the best sleep he had had in what felt like fucking years, and he had been ready to kill the assaulter even before the sound in an evil allegiance with his hangover drilled through his skull.

“Oh my god – oh my god, Tony!”

Feeling hateful, with several ear-blistering curses on his tongue, Tony experimentally opened his eyes. The place he was in looked like…

…the penthouse. What the ever-loving fuck.

Excuse the French. And the cliché.

“Pepper?” he inquired.

Pepper didn’t literally throw herself at him, but that was because she was a naturally dignified sort of person, and also because she was wearing heels and a pencil skirt and that sort of outfit made flying tackles inadvisable. She sank onto the side of the couch and wound her arms around him like two constrictors, and then she began sniffling into his shoulder.

Tony had absolutely zero clue what to do with this nightmare. It was new, and kind of out of the left field.

“I do concur with Miss Potts’ opinion, sir,” said JARVIS’ voice. “It is very good to have you back.”

Oh.

Truly waking up took a longer time than Tony would have liked, but it finally penetrated that he was home, really home, not just hallucinating it. The nightmare was over, and Pepper was here, warm, smelling as good as ever, and ready to take on the world for him once she’d had a good cry. Tony loved her with the burning temperature of a white dwarf, the cessation of their bedroom acrobatics notwithstanding.

He clung back.

“Good to hear you too, Jarvis,” he said, hoarse and trying to ignore the thorns piercing his skull with every consonant he uttered. It seemed to him that the proclamation fell absolutely flat, conveying none of the terrible affection he was practically brimming with after months elsewhere.

Whoever it was that said absence made the heart grow fonder knew exactly what they were talking about.

Tony was so wrapped up in fond reminiscence that it took him a few moments to realize he wasn’t wrapped up in Pepper anymore – at least not physically. The light of his life was pacing up and down the expansive living room, taking tiny, funny steps in her high heels and narrow skirt, and it might have done really great things for her derriere but it also looked so ridiculous that he nearly laughed. He reminded himself he shouldn’t laugh.
Then he frowned, trying to figure out why.

Laughter was good. Wasn’t it?

Pepper took a deep breath and, sure enough, the first non-shocked words out of her mouth were about a press conference.

“Tomorrow, Tony, before another newspaper posts an article about how you’re really dead and I just don’t want to give up control over your company. I need you to talk to the board, too – we need to oust Doyle Fergusson, and I am out of ideas. His background check came back clean, but I know he’s got ties to Hammer Tech. I was on the verge of asking Natasha to help…”

Tony hoped he looked as impassive as he was pretending to be. Right now, he couldn’t give less of a damn about the entire company. He hadn’t spared it a single thought while he was off-world; it just didn’t figure anywhere on his list of priorities.

“…is secondary, first I need to talk to the PR department about how we’ll spin this for the media. Michelle will come here tomorrow – I hate to call her in on Sunday, but need’s must, and the bonus will be worth it. You will listen to her, and you will go with the story she gives you. I know you are Iron Man, but right now I… I just… can’t take anymore of this. I swear, Tony.”

She looked at him, outwardly composed, but one look into her eyes was enough to see that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Tony almost felt bad that he didn’t care about any of those things she talked about.

Funny. For decades he had fooled himself into thinking that it was important to him – it was his greatest obligation, his life goals were mostly tied to it, and maybe he had resented it at times, but it had never occurred to him that all this time he was just doing what Howard wanted him to do. Out of laziness, or duty, or some misguided attempt to make his Father posthumously proud, Tony let himself be poked and prodded and questioned and censored and used as a figurehead.

Oh, he was a figurehead. And he was a billionaire genius playboy philanthropist, as he had informed Steve (bitter? who was bitter?), but he was all that all by himself. Running the company was…

…just a job. That he didn’t even like on most days.

“Sure, Pep,” he said, quirking his lips. He wasn’t even sure whether the smile was believable, the way his cheeks felt all stiff and unused to scrunching up for any happy purposes. “Set it all up and leave the deets with Jarvis. Jay, apple of my eye, make sure we don’t disappoint Pepper on this one, savvy?”

“I am making a note as we speak, Captain,” Jay replied, the horrible sap. He must have been so overwhelmed with fluffy and gooey feelings about Tony’s return that he didn’t even make a crack about Tony’s use of the royal ‘we’, considering it obviously wasn’t JARVIS who routinely disappointed Potts – the angel in their lives.

X

“Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” Tony said to the congregation.

The people were just standing there, muttering to one another and doing a little bit of elbow-checking that had only about fifty percent chance of hitting the actual intended target – except Bruce, who, poor thing, stood apart, as if the others were scared of elbow-checking him.
So Tony did what he felt he was obligated to do. He opened his mouth and let the most obnoxious thought in his head out of it.

It kind of made him want to run a screwdriver through his jugular – there was cliché and then there was tacky offence to good taste – but judging by the susurrus of exasperation he received from his alleged friends, his gesture of goodwill had been accepted in the spirit in which it had been offered.

“Somebody knock him on the head,” said Clint. “His eyes aren’t blue, but we don’t want to be taking chan-”

Steve came forwards, with his patented ‘little boy lost but still hopeful’ look on his face, and punched Tony in the jaw. And then hugged him.

Tony suspected that Steve was trying to communicate with him in some weird forties’ manly-man dialect. Tony didn’t speak it, and now his jaw was throbbing. It was an odd feeling – the first pain he had felt in months that wasn’t self-inflicted.

Well, with the exception of that time Loki had healed his frostbite, but Tony disregarded that on account of the healing.

“You pulled it,” Natasha commented unhappily. “I’m not sure that counts.”

Steve stopped trying to strangle Tony and looked back over his shoulder to emit rays of disapproval in the spy lady’s direction. “Any harder, and he’d have had to have his jaw wired back together.”

Clint and Natasha looked at each other and snorted.

“You say that like it’s a con-”

“-when, really…”

They both simultaneously smirked at Steve, and then redirected those smirks to Tony, who was rubbing at the already forming bruise on his face. Really, this was just an illustration of his life. These people were his team, and he aggravated them enough by just talking (just walking into the room sometimes) that they would have preferred to consign him to weeks of eating through a straw to silence him. He had barely come back from the presumed dead – and this was his welcoming committee.

And the absolute worst thing was: he would have to go in front of the media like this. Pepper was going to kill him.

He wished there was enough justice in the world that Pepper would direct her ire toward the people responsible (like Clint and Natasha and Steve), but that was a pipe dream. Pepper knew Tony was the softest mark, the easiest target, and the one least likely to retaliate.

So she was going to continue punishing him for everything. It was more convenient.

“I think that was supposed to be a joke,” said Wilson, coming forward and raising his hand.

Tony flinched away and threw up his arms in a block.

Wilson froze and stared at him. Then he, slowly (because fucker worked with PTSD-ing veterans and knew what he was looking at when he saw it) held the hand in front of him, waiting for Tony to compose himself and shake it.
Tony wished Cap would stop looking at him like that. Seriously, what sort of reaction did the guy expect after he had slugged Tony in the face? He hadn’t done it ‘really hard’, but Tony had seen his ‘really hard’ cave in not just skulls but actual titanium armor. Honestly, Tony probably didn’t even have a concussion. It was just a lovetap. That hurt.

Poetic.

Tony swallowed and shook Wilson’s hand. With a great effort he managed to scrunch up his face into something resembling a smirk. “Left my sense of humor in my other checkbook.”

“Good thing, too,” said Bruce, insinuating himself in Tony’s space with only a small amount of trepidation. “Else the Captain would have knocked it right out of your head.”

Bruce seemed drolly amused by the way Wilson practically jumped backwards to give him access to Tony, as if afraid that Bruce would react to being impeded by turning on the green. Tony wasn’t entirely sure how long he had been gone, but it should have been way more than long enough for Steve’s new friend to get over himself and start treating Bruce like a human being.

“Hey,” said Tony.

Bruce took his still extended hand. Tony pulled him closer and hugged him, relaxing a little when he was immediately hugged back. This felt a lot more comfortable than either of the previous two attempts at his life masked as embraces. Bruce needed hugs.

Maybe so did Tony?

It seemed like it could work out.

“Stark,” Natasha hissed with a hint of impatience.

Tony wasn’t the least bit inclined to let go of his science bro’ just so some KGB-reared ex-SHIELD assassin could try and punch him because she thought Steve had gone too easy on him.

She should get over herself, too. Clint kinda got a get-out-of-jail-free card this once, but just because the shit Loki had done to him had been really truly very, very mean.

“Alright,” Steve proclaimed mightily in the absence of Thor, the official mighty proclaimer. “We need to make sure Tony’s alright – Bruce, can you-”

“Sure,” Bruce agreed from somewhere around Tony’s shoulder, and commenced disentanglement.

Tony didn’t really agree with this course of action – either the disentanglement or the physical examination – but he knew that there were far worse alternatives, and he would be subjected to those if he tried protesting at this junction.

Besides, there were advantages to be taken from this situation.

“Okay,” he agreed, ignoring the suspicious looks. “I’ll let Bruce do his thing. The rest of you, out. We’ll all agree that you don’t want to see me turn my head and cough.”

He let the sight of the horrified faces (partially half-suppressed memories, partially imagination) on the other Avengers’ faces warm him, and patted Bruce’s back when Bruce choked and tried to hack up a lung.

The team beat a hasty retreat. Honestly.
“Pussies,” Tony commented.

Bruce laughed, although it sounded suspiciously wet (and cough-y). “I really did miss you.”

And he didn’t ask anything about what had happened to Tony wherever he had been, and he also didn’t jump straight to PR talk or mention the in absentia trial, so that made Tony feel… uh… nice?

Bruce worked in tandem with JARVIS, quietly and efficiently, and neither of them actually asked Tony to turn his head and cough, so all in all, Tony rated it a success. He wished Steve hadn’t hit him, but then the alternative was getting hit by Natasha, and she would have made sure it hurt a lot more.

When Bruce finally declared him unexpectedly (read ‘suspiciously’) intact, Tony relocated from the penthouse to his personal set of rooms and proceeded to lock everyone out of his apartment.

First thing he did when they finally – finally – left him alone was get plastered, worse even than he used to after Afghanistan, just to prove to himself that he could. Before the alcohol dragged him under, he thought he could see a pair of poisonously green cat-like eyes watching him from the shadows of his bedroom.

x

There were two good things about the ignominious fall of SHIELD.

One was that Hill now worked for him, which basically amounted to working for Pepper, and she mostly managed to manage the deadly duo of Clint and Natasha. Hill kept them busy and out of Pepper’s hair, and that, by extension, mostly kept them out of Tony’s hair.

The other was that even in this completely fucked up situation – when there was reasonable concern that Tony had been turned into a sleeper agent for Loki in some unidentifiable magical way (no other logical explanation for why the Prince of Fuckedupedness would have returned Tony seemingly unharmed) – Tony didn’t have to talk to Fury about it. Score! Freedom tasted especially sweet these days.

Almost like Asgardian mead. Speaking of which, it would have been really convenient if Thor showed up and explained the whole debt-related dilemma of the oath-heavy culture and reassured everyone that Tony had been let go without any mind-raping tentacles left behind.

Thor, the big meanie, didn’t show up. Tony crawled out of bed at about noonish and blindly staggered his way toward the communal kitchen. His autopilot successfully navigated him to the coffee maker; Tony stood in front of the machine, watched coffee gurgle into his mug, and wondered why everyone in the room had suddenly shut up when he entered.

He had pants on. T-shirt, too. He wasn’t covered in anything weird. If somebody had drawn on his face while he was passed out, JARVIS would have told him – unless it was really funny. But good sense of humor ruled out Clint, who was the only one likely to draw on unconscious people’s faces.

“Brucie?” Tony whined, cradling his full, hot mug in his palms, “have you been talking about me behind my back?”

“Banner isn’t even here, Stark,” Natasha informed him, trying to sound annoyed, but coming across just coldly apathetic.

Tony nodded and inhaled deeply the scent of ambrosia. “That explains the gossip.” He opened one
eye. “Why the guilty face, Wonder Boy?”

And that made more sense inside his hungover, uncaffeinated brain. Stevie Wonder. Steve. Wonder. Something. Just called to say he loved her. Him? That someone sitting next to Steve looked like a him, even with the abundance of hair.

“Uhm…” said Boy Wonder.

Tony rolled his eyes and took a deep draught of coffee. This was going to require focus. He didn’t feel like focusing. He invariably focused on the bad things.

Hazy was good.

“Tony… that is…”

Tony really wanted to tell him to spit it out, but Natasha looked ready to stab someone, and while Tony would have undoubtedly been her preferred target, Steve was within arm’s reach. It was a coin flip on who would suffer, and Tony actually didn’t want either of them to suffer, so he deliberately filled his mouth with coffee and waited. And waited.

And waited some more.

There were tiny ripples on the surface of his coffee. Beady bubbles that weren’t quite enough to call a foam clustered along its circumference.

When Tony glanced up and across the room again, Steve seemed to be on the verge of ritually committing suicide to make up for his sins. Tony didn’t know a human being could look that guilty without being covered head-to-toe in blood, clutching a butcher’s knife in their hands and standing above several hacked-up bodies. Which Cap wasn’t.

He was just sitting there on the couch, squeezed next to what Tony could figure out – genius, thanks muchly – was James Barnes, and having a companionable brunch with a trio of SHIELD agents.

Wait.

Okay, so, Tony maybe sometimes made little errors in his math, especially when he was sleep-deprived or hungover (not drunk or high, that usually just made him think more clearly, as if it blocked out all the useless detritus that insisted on clogging his cranium), he knew, JARVIS knew, JARVIS watched him and made corrections as needed. No stress. Still, Tony usually didn’t make errors in counting to three even when heavily concussed.

He drained the rest of his coffee, put the mug on the counter and tried again, this time using his fingers – just in case.

One. Two.

Three.

“Am I seeing double?”

Natasha slid down in her armchair, put her feet onto the coffee table – ignoring Steve’s protests – and muttered something unflattering in Russian that JARVIS politely didn’t translate.

Clint stretched along the second couch, ostentatiously ignoring Tony.
Steve moved to stand. “Look, Tony, I’m sorry I-”

“No,” Tony cut him off. “I’m not talking about your baby boo from back in the Paleolithic era – you were going to find him, sure, so, you found him, you brought him here. Where else were you going to take him? Nah. He makes sense. I’m talking about that.” He pointed his index finger at the zombie sitting opposite Natasha, in the other armchair.

“Mr Stark,” the zombie said with exasperation, to indicate how relaxed it felt in its surroundings – otherwise it would have been all blandness all the time, but it must have been hard to seem professional wearing plaid slippers and a t-shirt with a picture of a sunbathing alligator.

Tony stopped. Rewound. Flapped his hand. Pretending to not care was one of his bests impressions. He could do it professionally. In fact, he did do it professionally. “I’m beyond fashionably late to the pissed-at-Fury party.” He shrugged.

He didn’t doubt that people had been angry when they found out – and had been glad to have the guy back – and he hoped that someone had punched Fury in the face (they certainly had been quick to punch Tony in the face) and that there was a recording of it. Heavily encrypted, of course, as Fury was still officially dead. Tony would have to ask JARVIS. Still, judging by the matter-of-factness of the zombie’s presence in the Tower, this all had happened long enough ago that people had moved past it and on with they lives.

Tony was a futurist – not the kind of guy to drag up the past. He would jump onto this speeding train and then get ahead of it again.

“I understand that you feel slighted,” the zombie told him, projecting an aura of reasonableness, “but it was a tactical decision. It has not been aimed against you personally.”

Not personally. Only in general, Tony adlibbed.

He took great care to meet no one’s eyes (no matter how hard Steve was trying) as he approached the coffee table and nicked one of the meringues.

“You’re under this impression that I’m supposed to care,” he drawled. “But I don’t.”

He popped the candy into his mouth and wished quite hard that his statement were truthful. But, wishes, horses, all that. Speaking of horsepower, he should go check out his cars. Hopefully Clint hadn’t scratched anything during Tony’s little sabbatical.

“I’d invite you to make yourself at home, Agent, but you already did. So. Cheers. See you when the next cataclysmic event strikes. Right? Right.”

“Yes, well…” Steve looked to the side at Barnes, who was so far sticking with the idea that discretion was a better part of not having his lack of official invitation pointed out by the actual owner of the premises. “We also have a few new members. I’ll introduce you when they all get back.”

Obviously, since they were allowed to continue making use of his sweet crib, the Avengers hadn’t exactly missed Tony professionally.

Perfect. So he could take another day off. He sauntered toward the lift and viciously suppressed the urge to whistle some Morricone.

“Tony!” Steve called. “Tony, wait!”
“C’mon, Stark-”

“Let him be, Clint,” Coulson ordered. “Regardless of any other consideration, my presence in his home must have been a sho-”

The door closed. Tony glared sideways at the columns of numbered buttons. “Thanks for having my back, Jarvis. That was just great.”

“Perhaps, sir,” JARVIS replied tightly, “if you had not gotten black-out drunk as soon as you regained privacy, I might have had the opportunity to bring you up to date.”

Tony snorted. Figured that even in this situation, he was the one in the wrong.

x

About eight hours later, judging by the feel of his stomach, Tony put down the tools and decided that he had done enough work on the car to satisfy his need for instant gratification of creative impulse, and it was about as late as he could push off the briefing without crossing the line of cowardice.

“What else did I miss, Jarvis?”

There was a moment of silence. Then the holographic displays turned on and the screens filled with significant events and economic news and snooker results, just because JARVIS was a troll and trying to distract Tony from the thing that was going to hurt like a bejeezus.

Tony just wanted the suspense to be over. He was so fucking tired of waiting for the other shoe to drop. He wanted his buddy to drop all the fucking shoes right now, so what if it buried Tony in an avalanche of footwear? At least he would be able to finally start drinking his way out from under it.

JARVIS replaced the report of some charity gala – something about Uganda? – with a picture from one of his security feeds.

Tony’s breath caught in his chest. It felt like the air around him grew colder with every second; when he reached up to rub his eyes (not that he doubted them, they just itched) his fingers trembled.

Okay. Okay, this made sense. It was a nice picture. Tame, but descriptive enough, and it punched straight through whatever flimsy denial Tony might have attempted to construct.

“So,” he said. Then he cleared his throat and tried again. “So, Pepper and Happy. When did that happen?”

“I believe your prolonged absence wore on both Miss Potts and Mr Hogan. They sought comfort in one another.”

Of course the story had to make perfect sense while still starring Tony as the insensitive jerk who had hurt everyone’s feelings.

“That basically makes me Cupid. Or, no – that makes Loki Cupid. Huh. I’m telling him next time I see him.” He was pretty certain that he would be seeing Loki someday soon and, funnily enough, didn’t exactly mind, despite the fact that they mostly saw each other because Loki got bored and blew something up and the Avengers were called in to try and fail apprehending him for the umpteenth time.
He was disappointed in the universe’s dramatic timing when the Assemble Alarm didn’t sound within the next minute.

Or the next hour.

In the end the Alarm did sound, and Tony wasn’t so much disappointed as going to fucking cut their pizza budget when the Avengers hopped onto the quinjet and went off to save the day without him.

Steve’s contrite ‘Sorry, Tony – we just got so used to having to do this without you…’ made Tony reconsider. He was nixing the pizza budget entirely, and changing his Netflix password too. If he could remember it.

JARVIS would know it, surely?

Except JARVIS might not have been on board…

Tony stared at the half-built machine on the counter by the opposite wall of the workshop. It was a mystery; he had been at it for – whoa, close to three hours now – and still hadn’t managed to figure out what he had been trying to build. The memories right before… before the battle with the Ontvættir were so much colorful mist, and, huh, how did this bottle of cognac get here? Classy.

Dummy beeped.

Tony shook his head. “Nope, Jimmy Five. No booze for you until you turn twenty-one. Let it not be said that Tony Stark didn’t learn from some of his Father’s fuck-ups.”

Dummy might have been going on thirty, but as long as nobody pointed it out, Tony was going to keep up the pretense that they were both fifteen years younger than they really were.

x

In his nightmare, Tony was invisible, inaudible and intangible.

He woke up yelling – JARVIS’ name in a desperate voice – and afterwards hadn’t been able to figure out which of the Jarvies he had had been trying to call.

“I am here, sir,” his A.I. assured him, projecting concern.

“Yeah. Yeah, you are,” Tony said instead of a more composed, Solo-esque ‘I know’. The trouble was, he didn’t have a clue where he was. He certainly wasn’t all here.

A thought niggled. Probably a blended half-memory, half-hallucination, brought on by relative sobriety and recent nightmare, but Tony felt, somewhere deep, possibly in his bone marrow, that the green fucking fairy would know.

x

Tony looked down at the roiling sea at his feet, at the hungry sharks drawn in by the smell of blood in the water, at the flashing medusas trying so desperately to sting him and, indeed, the piranhas showing off their teeth in the hopeless effort to intimidate him. There was no Steve in this fantasy, though. There was just Tony, dangling on the hook of Pepper’s fishing rod, and he wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted her to pull him up again… or cut bait.

Having his flesh chewed off of his bones couldn’t have been such a bad death, right?
Maybe he should have taken the armor. Harder to get chewed up through gold-titanium exoskeleton.

Funny. Would that work against Pepper chewing him up?

Probably not. Pepper was the Piranha with the capital P… when she wasn’t being the Shark with the capital S.

“That will be all for today,” said the PR gnome standing next to Tony. “Thank you all for coming.”

Then there was a hand on Tony’s elbow and a quieter voice said, away from the microphones: “Let’s go, Mr Stark.”

Tony, startled, looked around. The press conference was over, and yet, it hadn’t penetrated when it had started. In his head it had been all haze, all the time – and in its midst – heh, the midst of the mist – there was the association game his subconscious played with (or against) his Id.

“That could have gone so much worse,” Tony quipped, and the truth of the statement was really just incidental.

When he focused, he could remember all the answers he had given, sort of like he had handed control of his mouth over to an autopilot, which sounded risky (and fishy, to keep up with the theme), but in fact had been proven to largely keep him out of trouble and Piranha Pepper’s bad graces.

It made a sad kind of sense that the only way he could make Pepper happy would be if he stopped using his brain.

X

Tony was busy catching up on the TBBT he missed, running diagnostics on the older Mark Twenty-Seven, overseeing fabrication of the chassis for a new bot, playing checkers against JARVIS, eating a toast with jam and signing a stack of documents Pepper had bestowed upon him, when Steve wandered in and smiled the smile of all little boys who know which adults are generous with candy.

“Hey Tony,” he enthused. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Tony blinked.

Honestly, considering that this man was the pinnacle of humankind, and that he had repeatedly exceeded all expectations for the acuity of his senses and his mind… was that question supposed to be a joke?

Tony shook his head.

Steve’s grin widened. “I won’t keep you long. There’s just some things I’ve been thinking ‘bout and you weren’t here, so it piled up a bit.”

He offered Tony a data stick. Yay for the WWII veteran being successfully inducted further into the twenty-first century.

“Now that you’re back, Tony, I was hoping you could look at it for me.”
Tony accepted the stick, and with the simultaneous press of three keys asked JARVIS to display the files on his screen instead of the checkers. A data stick was an awesome thing, but JARVIS had already been in Steve’s files, and could access them remotely, no superfluous hardware needed.

A list of equipment in need of maintenance and ideas for new equipment appeared on the screen. The scrollbar on the right gave him an idea of how long the list was.

Tony nodded.

He wished he could have been surprised. He wasn’t. He managed to put on an amused expression and even heckle Cap a bit, though he didn’t have much success in dissipating the oppressive atmosphere.

“…I really hate just dumping this all on you,” Steve said uncomfortably.

“I can tell.” Tony could also tell that no amount of hating it had stopped Cap from doing it. Ever the dutiful soldier and dedicated leader. Good to see him working hard for the benefits of the team.

“If it’s too much—”

“What’s that?” Tony cut in. “Can’t hear you over the sound of my awesomeness. You weren’t going to suggest going to SHIELD R’n’D instead, right? You wouldn’t have done that to the poor benighted teammate who’s been heroically saving you from having to make-do with mediocre gear up to now?”

Even if he hadn’t been doing it for the past few months. Funny, how they had managed in the meantime without involving SHIELD, but suddenly SHIELD was acceptable over burdening Tony. To Tony’s suspicious mind, this looked like a PR stunt for the audience of one.

Was Steve trying to con him?

Was that really what was happening here?

Steve tried to laugh, but mostly just looked uncomfortable. “I know I’m bothering you. I’ll go. Just—don’t hole up in here, please? Not more than you need to.”

Tony glanced at the screen, at a year’s worth of work that he and JARVIS could between them do in maybe three months, provided that Tony gave up on sleep and food and social engagements.

SI had managed that long without him. Maybe another season of his absence wouldn’t perceptibly hurt the company?

“Yeah, bye,” Tony muttered, and waited until Steve was gone before he poked at the edge of the bruise on his cheek. “Jay, baby, list them by priority.” The entries reshuffled. “You’re a peach.”

He couldn’t help noticing that out of the top ten tasks, eight had to do with Iron Man (and contained particulars Steve wouldn’t have known to be concerned about – JARVIS was a peachy peach). The ninth was Barnes’ arm, and the tenth was maintenance on Falcon’s wings, which sounded reasonable.

“Love you too,” he said glibly, but JARVIS seemed to take it like it was meant.

Tony put away Pepper’s paperwork, turned off the show that he hadn’t been watching anyway, saved the game for later and licked his fingers. “Let’s play. Gimme some tunes, Romi.”
“Does sir have a particular wish?” dryly inquired the Honored Keeper of the Jukebox.

Tony shrugged with one shoulder, busy tapping the keyboard with the other hand. “Whatever. Play FurySAWetNoodle Mix, random track-”

“May I remind you that you have deleted your playlists in a fit of pique, sir?”

Tony rolled his eyes. As though JARVIS hadn’t saved them anyway. This was Tony’s best friend’s way of being passively aggressive, and it came across as heart-warming, because aside from the excessive and unnecessary emotional displays immediately upon his return, Tony had yet to see much evidence that he had been missed.

JARVIS being contrary to get back at Tony for Tony worrying him was just… cute.

“Whatever,” Tony drawled before he could get all choked up. “Give me Ozzy, Jay. Pick an album at random.”

He focused on the armor. Mark Twenty-Seven was fine, but he resolved to go over the contacts in the vambraces, because they seemed a little iffy to him. He determined that the ideas he had for the latest Mark were not mutually compatible, at least not with the tech he could create right now, and pouted at having to pick between them.

He was about to submit to JARVIS’ insistence at running diagnostics on the arc reactor, when he realized what the strange, grating sound was.

‘If I close my eyes forever, will it all remain unchanged?’

“What the hell, Jarvis?” he snapped. “What am I listening to?”

‘If I close my eyes forever, will it all remain the same?’

“Skip that forward!” He clapped his palms over his ears – having forgotten about the connector in his hand, so he ended up nearly stabbing himself in the temple. “I fucking hate that song.”

The sound was cut off.

“If you permit, sir,” JARVIS spoke flatly, “I am not very fond of it either.”

Oh, yeah. At least Jay had missed him.

x

Work didn’t work.

Or Tony didn’t work. Wait, no, Tony worked, it just wasn’t working.

It being Tony’s brain, apparently.

He stretched his mind, but where he was used to finding solid holds on concepts, he couldn’t even get traction today. Ideas slipped away from, or evaporated in little puffs of frustration, and he was about ready to take a fireman axe to Steve’s sodding sniper rifle, which was actually Barnes’ sniper rifle, which was yet more actually Hydra’s rifle on loan to the Winter Soldier, not that Tony advocated trying to return it.

The rifle was broken beyond repair, in Tony’s expert opinion. But apparently for brain-washed assassins, that sort of thing had sentimental value and Steve had asked Natasha to help him video-
call just so he could make sad eyes at Tony about it.

It felt like emotional blackmail.

Tony hated it.

“Please don’t startle, sir-”

JARVIS’ warning had come in the nick of time.

Dummy’s claw gripped the back of Tony’s t-shirt. Tony did flinch, but he managed not to reflexively attack, and decided that was a huge success in and of itself.

“You’re so stupid,” he grumbled at the bot. Then he looked at the pieces of what was once a very vintage weapon. “But I am obviously stupid, too. And I made you, so you were probably doomed from the start.”

Dummy tugged. Tony let the bot drag him away from the counter, because otherwise the rifle would have ended as a bit of slag on the bottom of some furnace, and Barnes would have had to find himself another security blanket.

Tony knew a toy maker. They did giant rabbits. They could make a teddy bear for a traumatized mass murderer, he was sure.

Dummy let go of him and rolled away. A moment later he rolled back, holding something in his claw that Tony genuinely didn’t expect to see ever again.

He took the book from the claw, surprised by how well it withstood being handled by Dummy – only then it occurred to him that an Asgardian book of magic for beginners was meant for magical kids, so it could likely withstand a lot more than Dummy’s claw.

“Oh yeah.” He grinned, turning over the pages. “Let’s take a break.”

x

He’d begun to feel it. And that was bad.

Before, it seemed easy. He found a cause, he went and killed people – sometimes murdered them wholesale – and afterwards congratulated himself for being a better person than he used to be as the so-called Merchant of Death. He had been very proud of himself for adjusting to that way of life so easily.

He’d been told killing shouldn’t be easy. He had never understood why people had such a problem with it.

He choked on a mouthful of bourbon. It burned all the way down to his lungs and he coughed out what little came up again, splattering it over the carpet (picked by Pepper, but not Pepper’s carpet – about twelve percent of it was Pepper’s – she hadn’t liked that; she had imagined that being ‘together’ would automatically make them financially one unit). His nose remained full of the smell, of the burn of it.

Oh, all it took was one measly little toddler and the way its neck gave under the blade of the sword in Tony’s hand. So arbitrary, in the great scheme of things. But it still threw this switch somewhere in his head and, look, Mr Narcissist wasn’t actually a sociopath. Who would have thought?
New York glittered behind the windows like a huge electrified beehive, busy buzzing and bustling and boozing (not only in Tony’s case) and at a glance it looked perfectly the same as any other night.

Today was bad.

There were other bad days. AIM sucked. And Hydra was teeth-kickingly assholeish. But today was worse. These things – these little villains with their tiny little villainous militias, or even without any militias at all, like grade school kids playing in the grown-up sandbox – were sometimes too lethal to try and detain. The threat to civilians was that bad. Idiots had scary ideas, occasionally, like detonating dirty bombs in the middle of Atlanta or releasing toxins into the air above Detroit, and it was anyone’s guess if talking them down would have any effect.

And sure, Tony was the fastest, so he was usually the first on the scene. Today it was a kid – not literally, but as good as. Hurt. Humiliated. Wanted to pay it forward a thousand times. Tony absolutely got where the girl was coming from, and the rows of parallel scars over her bare forearms didn’t help at all, but he still stood in front of her while she monologued, still quipped – ‘Please, hijacking a plane is so last decade...’ – still extended his arm and blew her up with a tiny guided missile. The Firecracker, as he liked to call them.

They found her arm lying next to the curb, fingers curled around the remote detonator. Button unpushed.

Mission accomplished.

Tony downed another mouthful of bourbon, and this went the way it was supposed to.

“Should I be asking what her name was?”

“No,” JARVIS replied with certainty Tony envied.

“It feels so… everyday. She’s just joined a huge, huge pile of desiccated biomass I’ve made out of various human beings. In that state they don’t seem like individual people, and I used to feel like they never had been.” That admission deserved another shot.

Okay, maybe two shots. It was a big admission.

“Is the second one for me,” inquired an unexpected voice, “or are you daring me to teach you to abstain?”
“Intruder alert, Jarvis,” Tony deadpanned. Honestly, he had the most advanced A.I. in the world, and it seemed chronically incapable of warning him that someone was breaching his private space.

He didn’t know where he had gone wrong with the programming.

Loki took stock of Tony’s lack of violent reaction and seemed to relax. He also seemed to become a little more saturated for a lack of a better description. Actually, Tony could feel him now. He swallowed and leaned back, palms against the edge of the counter. Holy shit, he had missed the sensation of magic.

“As you say, sir,” replied JARVIS, and then rapidly switched from sarcastic to worried. “I apologize. It seems that my sensors do not detect astral projections.”

“You did not expect me,” Loki stated, somewhat surprised.

Tony shook his head. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him that the alleged deity that claimed to owe him to the point that he mounted a solid defense in court for Tony would bother to seek him out again so soon. He had expected something semi-sane and comfortably avoidant, like letting bygones be bygones, for fuck’s sake.

“I expected you to be done with this little old mortal. I mean, I know what I’m worth – Forbes continually undervalues me but Pepper says to let them be, so I might be one of the only two people who do, but…” he trailed off, because Loki was listening to him, concentrating on him, at Tony was soaking up the magic like he was a damn sponge for the stuff.

It must have changed the consistency of his blood to honey, because the world slowed down and sweetened, and he honestly didn’t care what he was saying.

It was the truth, and it should have hurt, but it didn’t. Not when he was flying sky-high. “I thought you’d have fucked and discarded me by now.”

Loki nodded, one mouth corner rising upward. “I might have – were you any less interesting a creature.”

“So, now what?” Tony inquired. “You want to date me?”

Frosty grimaced in overplayed distaste. “Date? If I sought a mortal companion for a casual relationship, I would choose one far less damaged. Your wounds would hinder your physical exertions further than my patience could ever stretch.”

Tony closed his eyes. That was a bitch of an answer, because it didn’t even address whether Loki wanted him, much less what he was trying to manipulate him toward. Right now the not-dating thing could have been straightforward disgust with Tony’s lack of bodily mint condition, or a backhanded insinuation about wanting something yet-more-serious, as one might expect from a Shakespearean culture.

Tony decided he didn’t care either way. So long as Loki would drop by and pump him full of magic every once in a while, he was game.

Also, he didn’t have a sliver of doubt that the sex would be really awesome. In both meanings of the word.
Loki took a seat on the sofa—

-startled ever so minutely when it turned out to be unexpectedly soft and attempted to swallow him, and it was one of the funniest things Tony had ever seen; he probably busted something trying not to laugh out loud—

-and primly crossed his legs. He could do this, since he wasn’t wearing the full, heavy battle armor, but rather a toned-down version consisting mostly of velvet and leather strips. He looked like a Pontiac Firebird – all streamlined and sleek and pretty.

“I take it from the lack of Avengers bursting in to Mirandize me that the warrant for my arrest has been rescinded?”

Tony had no idea about that. If it happened, it had happened during his absence, and hadn’t been included in JARVIS’ info packet. Knowing JARVIS, it wasn’t the kind of oversight the A.I. would allow on his watch. Hence, no amnesty. Not that Tony had seriously expected any. Not that Tony had particularly cared.

He still didn’t care. He handed over one of the shots he had poured, which Loki accepted with a fabulous skeptical expression. Tony was about to down the other shot when it occurred to him that the only reason his parlor wasn’t full of Avengers was that they were so busy therapying-off the trauma of today’s assembly that they hadn’t noticed an alien megalomaniacal wizard with a considerable kill count waltzing into their home base.

“I was surprised to see you walking free on Asgard,” replied Tony, counter-fishing like a pro. “I had been under the impression that you were in hiding.”

Loki grinned the grin of rich white kids who knew-they-were-above-the-law everywhere. “The only true crime against Asgard’s law that I committed was facilitating the entrance of Jotnar to the Armory – and even that I had under control. The invaders did not have the opportunity to cause any significant harm. The whole event fell under the heading of provocation rather than treason – and I did spend some short time imprisoned for it.”

Loki actually shared actual information. Tony was floored. And also seriously reconsidered the previously specious idea of a space-mage crushing on him. Unlikely, but – let’s be objective here – far from impossible.

“Got disinherited, too, if I got that right..?” Tony quipped, not quite hiding the seriousness behind his question, since he didn’t particularly want to be disemboweled even on this otherwise really shitty day.

“That was a political decision on the Allfather’s part,” Loki returned primly. “The King felt that his negotiations with Jotunheim would have been hampered by the presence of a king-slayer in his house. From what I heard, my blood-brother is holding a grudge for Laufey’s death.”

“But he hasn’t asked for you to be handed over?” Tony remarked in a deliberately quizzical tone (it used to work on his Father, who generally became far less aggressively defensive when Tony made it a point to appear stupid, whereupon he just seemed the garden-variety sort of disenchanted).

“Please.” Loki gave him a look that was rivaled in condescension only by noble British ladies from hundred years ago. He touched his fingers together in a suitably dainty gesture, just to underscore the impression. Then it all broke when the corner of his mouth quirked up. He hitched one shoulder, eyes glittering. “Thor had been the one to lead the attack, and even the Jotnar know that where Odin is concerned, Thor is untouchable. Besides-” He unfurled one hand in a tacit ‘what can
you do’. “-Mother would never have allowed any such thing.”

“That’s great for you.” Tony remembered the crowd of hobnobbers kneeling in Stuttgart. He remembered the perfectly controlled panic in the tremble of Coulson’s hands when he came to this very room asking for help recovering Clint – and the bitterness in Tony’s stomach when Fury said ‘they called it’ on the ‘carrier. He remembered the post-apocalyptic makeover given to Manhattan. “I can’t help but notice that you’ve never been held accountable for all the fuckery you committed here.”

“Even in your realm you do not hold those mentally impaired fully accountable for their misdeeds. When my true mental state was discovered, I was granted healing, and the consequences for me were much less devastating than they would have been otherwise.”

Tony let him have that one.

He hadn’t even really noticed when he had re-categorized Loki from ‘enemy’ to ‘whatever, so long he doesn’t blow up anything anywhere near us’. He had met creatures incomparably worse, and although he would have probably been gutted for calling Loki a ‘small fish’, there it was. From the Avengers’ point of view, Loki genuinely was a small fry, although admittedly only because he had never truly had much in the way of villainous ambition.

Loki had only ever been playing, with the exception of that one event that had happened after he had found out his entire life was a lie, attempted to commit suicide, failed, and got tortured. Add brain-wash on top of that, and Tony was more than ready to forgive and forget.

The only sticking point would have been Coulson. Which…

“Oh, you’ll never guess who rose from the dead since we took a vacation.”

“x"

“How much did you drink last night?”

Tony blearily glared at the world around himself. There was a lot of hateful sunlight everywhere around. He was lying belly-down on a couch, his chest ached from being pressed into the arc reactor by gravity – damn you, gravity! – despite the couch’s softness. There was a stabbing ache in his neck, too, from keeping his head turned to the side so he wouldn’t get smothered by the upholstery.

Tony groaned, pained. Coulson had been asking something. Something about last night. Oh. “A glass?” he ventured. He had drunk one, then poured two more, given one of those to his late-night guest and the other stood, still full, on the floor next to the couch, because Tony had been continually distracted from it. “Maybe? Jay?”

“The only alcoholic beverage you consumed was half a tumbler of bourbon. I took the liberty of disposing of the rest of it for you.”

Which, Tony assumed, was the code for ‘I have directed one of the cleaning bots to remove the other tumbler, because we do not want the Avengers to panic about Loki’s visit’. JARVIS was an absolute peach.

Tony ignored Clint’s scoff and raised one hand with the Devil’s horns. “Seriously? Go, me.”

“I don’t believe it,” Clint informed him, as if he thought that Tony wanted to hear his opinion. “Stark, I didn’t know you could sleep without drinking yourself into stupor first.”
Tony hadn’t known either. “Funny how you discover these little things about yourself.” He wasn’t sure if it counted when he had been drugged to sleep by magic, but then, that wasn’t a sentence he would willingly utter in the presence of… actually, anyone. ‘Drugged to sleep by magic’ couldn’t have sounded like a good thing in any language known to man.

However, aside from the physical discomfort that was a direct result of spending far too much time in a position that a human body wasn’t meant to be put in, he felt better than he had felt in weeks. Clearer. More rested. Less like the only good thing in the world was a bottle of booze.

Actually fairly confident that today he could wrap his mind around his half-built mystery machine.

“You know what else is funny?” Clint quipped. “How I’m down to the last full quiver of arrows after yesterday, and you told me not to go to SHIELD, because you were going to get me all the tech I need. But, by all means, go on catching up on your beauty sleep. You know you need it.”

If asked, Tony would have claimed that Clint saying something like this couldn’t have hurt him – and believed it. He would have been wrong.

He snorted into the couch cushion under his head. “Don’t get your pants in a twist, Grumbling Commando.” Ooh, triple-pun. He was proud of himself, even if no one else got it. “I’ll get right on it. Gimme a hands up?”

A hand gripped his wrist and pulled. He crashed into the floor with an ‘oof’ and a fucking painful crushing sensation in his chest that included having his breath punched out.

Clint chuckled.

“Get up and take a shower, Stark,” ordered the resident zombie. “You need it.” He left as dramatically as was expected of a super secret agent, although the effect was mostly spoiled by the assassin puppy that faithfully dogged his steps.

The actually frightening thing about this moment was that Natasha remained behind.

She crouched next to Tony, looking at him seriously when he took the risk of raising his head. She checked that he was breathing, didn’t seem to have gotten too damaged from his enforced tumble, and sighed.

“You know Clint’s an asshole,” she said quietly, offering a hand that Tony eyed with suspicion and chose not to take unless he really, really needed it.

Tony had a thick skin. Had to have a thick skin, to survive being a millionaire’s son become a billionaire in his own right. When they called him the Merchant of Death, he smirked. When they labeled him a manwhore, he laughed into their faces.

But it was different when the hate came from people whom he had allowed under his emotional armor. From… friends.

The solution was in fact very simple. He removed Barton from the ‘friend’ category and put him back into ‘ally’ where he obviously belonged. It stung; if pressed, Tony might have admitted to feeling a little sad about it.

Still, such was life.

He rolled over and sat up. His ribs weren’t worse than bruised.
“Yeah, I know,” he said to Natasha, and mimed a sloppy salute. “Don’t let me keep you with ranting about how much I don’t give a fuck.”

Loki hadn’t asked for his book back. Tony sure as Hell wasn’t offering to return it.

At least he already had the language figured out. Back in Loki’s vacation house it had kept him busy far better than half-heartedly trying to break through his own code and cutting into his forearms. Magic was incredibly frustrating, but also about the most fun thing since the Iron Man suit.

Not that Tony would ever admit it out loud. Officially, he hated magic.

The fabrication units were busy assembling Barton’s arrows – honestly, if the dumbass had just opened his mouth and asked JARVIS, it all could have been done at any time without Tony. And Bruce had conditional access to damn near all Tony’s labs and workshops.

“Does anyone even treat you as a person, Jay?” he asked, slowly relocating from frustrated to honestly pissed off with this so-called ‘team’ of rejects that couldn’t play nice even when they wanted something.

“In terms of politeness, sir, or in terms of apprehending my agency?”

“The second,” Tony said, leaning closer to inspect the thingamajigs lining the inner seam of what was meant to be a lid on the mystery machine. Steve was polite even to the toaster, since Barton had told him that the toaster was equipped with an A.I. and would scorch the toasts of everyone that didn’t show it proper deference (it had been funny at the time, but in hindsight Tony suspected that Steve had shelved it as one more instance of Tony Stark being as much of a low-key hindrance to his daily life as he could be). For the record, it wasn’t true. The toaster’s A.I. was limited to recognizing objects that could damage it and refusing to toast them.

No one who hadn’t tried to put in something wrapped in cellophane (looking at you, Steve) or with a nail stuck in it for funsies (fuck you, Burton) would have even noticed there was any A.I. there.

“Dr Banner to some extent, sir. And also Miss Potts, of course. Lately Mr Hogan as well.”

Good on Pepper. Good of Pepper, too.

“Is this a human-assembling machine?” Tony inquired, pulling his hand back as if the half-finished mechanism had burnt him.

JARVIS let out a quiet hum to indicate he was processing. After a minute he admitted: “It could be, sir.”

“With a lot of work, you mean,” Tony added.

“Or a little help.”

JARVIS didn’t have any way to cast a significant look at something, but Tony was canny enough to get it anyway. He glanced at the book that stood – as innocently as anything that originally belonged to Loki could – on a shelf in between glossy manuals that never would be read and a thick Stark Industries rule-book that Pepper had given him as a present for his birthday (every year – he always managed to lose or destroy them, and she always gifted him the latest revision).
“Why do we want to assemble humans? Do we want to assemble humans?” Tony honestly thought that there were far more than enough humans being assembled the old tried-and-true method, and this idea was not even gratuitous oversciencing, just straight up Pratchettesque *I do it because I know I shouldn’t.*

“I would recommend taking the philosophical debate to Dr Cho, sir,” said JARVIS. “Furthermore, you may want to prepare arguments for when she asks you how it is different from your creation of strong artificial intelligence.”

Tony chewed the inside of his cheek for a while. This was the kind of thing that would have completely confused him yesterday and left him floundering for definitions and searching for the thin line between progress and evil. Today the answers seemed pretty clear to him.

He shook his head. “Scrap it. And if Helen comes asking, tell her I can build her the best chassis money can buy. I’ll pay up whatever the bet was.”

“There wasn’t a bet, sir. You really just wanted to prove somebody wrong.”

x

Barton wasn’t speaking with Tony.

Coulson had very nearly carried out his threat, and had only been stopped by Natasha. Tony suspected that this was less a matter of mercy or pity on her side than the fact that she had been genuinely amused.

Tony decided that this was too tenuous a lifeline and resolved not to box up the next batch of Barton’s arrows, put them in front of his door and put a timer on it. A timer that counted down. In big, red, shiny numbers on an old-school digital display.

It had been funny, up until the taser-wielding zombie part.

“I have started the fabrication of more arrows, sir,” JARVIS informed him as he limped into the workshop. His ankle protested being kicked the only way it knew how.

“Good idea, Princess Peach.” Quite a few of the new arrows were damaged over the course of what Barton considered bomb-disposal and everyone else would have termed public endangerment. Had the box been a bomb, part of the Tower would have been reduced to rubble, a few of the Avengers tragically deceased, and Hulk on a rampage across New York.

Then again, Barton wasn’t that stupid – he was still alive, and it couldn’t have happened solely on Coulson’s merit. He had probably figured out that Tony was pranking him and gone along with it in the most destructive way possible. And then turned around, blamed Tony for everything, and played the victim.

Asshole.

“As you say, sir,” JARVIS said in the long-suffering tone of old British butlers everywhere.

Tony automatically went for the nearest bottle of alcohol… and found wine. It was a good vintage, but still – *wine.* He could read Jay’s and Dummy’s collusion in it clear as algebra. He left the bottle standing where it was and let the siren’s call of his ongoing project pull him over to the remotest corner of the room.

He had cleared away all engineering paraphernalia and played around with *linguistics.* If anyone
had told him he might one day do this, he would have sued them for slander. And then have them committed for posterity.

“Fire up the holo, Jay.”

An unimaginably intricate model appeared hovering in the air. Literally unimaginably, since Tony needed to see it to keep most of it in his mind for further purposes. It made him want to cringe; he knew he was looking at a kindergartner’s scribble of what should have rightly been a formula for some obscure branch of nucleonics.

It was all he could do, at a stretch, to understand what it represented and how it could be used.

He had crashed through the frontier of human knowledge and found himself in a universe of quantum. Strings to strum. *Shiny.* Look, baby’s first steps. He felt like someone should be taking a photo of him right now – but then, it wasn’t like anybody had taken photos when he had managed his first few four-dimensional steps.

Being reduced to a toddler in a scientific sense hurt. He wished he could just go on hating *magic* instead of realizing how hopelessly behind he was in *science.*

Here Tony had it once again confirmed that religion was always the matter of someone’s cultural superiority.

He didn’t have the receptors, the senses, the right extradimensional presence to do anything but observe the results and theorize about the mechanics. The question that remained at the tail end of every train of thought was this: *what must I do to survive another dose of Extremis?*

x

Another week, another press conference, another brown-nosing session with the Board – and another Assemble Alarm.

Tony was getting into the swing of it.

“Target acquired,” he heard Natasha say via the comm.

“Status?” asked Steve and Coulson over one another.


Tony flew up higher to see over the smoking ruin of a gym to the place that had been trashed by Native American totem-creatures before the Hulk appeared and they had morphed, Power-Rangers-villain-style, into a colossus of predatory power. Then the new guys had jumped in and Steve had firmly instructed Tony to go and help with apprehending the perpetrator.

Tony had done this by blasting apart the room ‘the perpetrator’ had been it. And kind of killing him in the process.

“It fell apart,” reported Falcon. “Hulk, Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver are getting the detached ones down. I’m back-up, in case we missed any.”

“unlikely,” mentioned the new girl in a dismissive voice that strongly reminded Tony of the self-confidence he used to feel at that age.
“We have several dead and wounded students, people,” informed them Coulson. “This is going to be a disaster. Get ready for the circuit.”

“Darn,” Steve said, heartfelt.

Hulk grunted in agreement.

“That’ll give you a chance to finally find a dame,” mentioned Barnes, who had somehow managed to access their commline.

Tony had a suspicion regarding the how, and it sounded really interesting. “Been talking to my artif-”

“Schmoozing’s Stark’s area,” Barton cut in. “You don’t need me there to stand behind him and pretend to lap up his ooze.”

Tony honestly didn’t know what he had done to make Barton hate him. This was so far beyond the line of general assholery or even anger at the (yes, okay tasteless) prank Tony had pulled.

“Bol’she ne nuzhna, Yestreb,” said Romanov, to the two of them who understood.

And to Tony, because the translation appeared briefly on his HUD. Huh, so even she thought that Barton had a problem.

In any case, Iron Man wasn’t needed anymore (hadn’t been needed for anything but killing someone, yippee, this was becoming a motherfucking theme in his life) so he took his leave. He ignored Steve’s voice and Coulson’s promises of disciplinary actions and Barton’s pithy remark and flew home. He didn’t mute the channel, since he apparently still wasn’t the kind of asshole that would leave his team to fight alone, should there be any mysterious previously unnoticed enemy, but he was just about done with being the team’s piñata.

Later, once he was soaking in his bathtub and trying to shake off the feeling of utter loathing for the entire world, he had JARVIS holo-display the reports on today’s clusterfuck.

Another kid, Tony realized. No, he thought, peer-reviewing his claim. Another barely-adult teenager. Adult in the sense of the law allowing him to own weapons and getting married, should the fancy strike him. Getting married sounded like a very destructive thing, but Tony still thought it was far better than threatening mass-murder of the people who had mass-murdered his forefathers.

‘Simon Aspen’ was the name on the ID. It didn’t fit the face scrunched-up in hatred that Tony remembered.

Avenger was much more fitting. It took the idea of revenge, raised it to a pedestal and created an ideology around it that was based on some pretty intuitive shit – eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Genocide for genocide. Yay for getting even.

Tony hated bigotry. He hated racism, sexism, fascism, homophobia, xenophobia and any kind of extremism – because it was stupid, yeah, sure, but frankly mostly because ninety-five percent of a human being’s worth was the contents of their brain, and getting hung up on eye color, skin color, bedtime rituals, the specific orifices one preferred to use for sex and the exact shape of their partner’s (or partners’) sexual organs or the number of extremities they were created with when, really, a chassis could be adjusted as needed at any time… was just moronic.

He was the poster boy for equal belligerence and indiscriminate sexual and intellectual attraction.
He was, honestly, the last person who should ever be cast in the role of a propagator of the holocaust of Native Americans. Like, the last. Steve Rogers would have been standing in front of him in that queue. Admittedly, right in front of him, but that would have at least added a nice view to the ignominy of being last at something.

“Two is coincidence?” he inquired wetly.

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS agreed and, because he could read Tony’s mind to a frightening degree, continued: “But that would not make three an enemy action. In fact, considering the particulars, you may very well be dealing with a fad.”

JARVIS uttered the last word with a nearly palpable distaste.

“Do you ever consume anything but alcohol? I have been reliably informed that this is not nourishing enough to sustain a human body.”

“I am so ready for this day to end,” Tony said from his position on the floor of the landing pad, where he had been doing some simple maintenance on the circuitry of the sliding cover panels. He had been too wired to sleep but too tired to get down to the workshop, and ended up here, with a bottle for company.

Only now he had more company. He didn’t feel quite up to entertaining tonight.

“I’m going to end up sainted if I reach certain number of god’s visits per life, you know? Vatican’s got quotas for this and everything. I’m probably already eligible for canonization.”

“Do not say this to Thor,” commanded Loki, way more serious that Tony thought the situation warranted. “He would seek to make it happen for that mortal he so adores, in addition to raising her to Asgard’s throne.”

Tony shuddered. That was one case of cultural misunderstanding he would rather avoid. So far they were getting around the religion issue by claiming that Thor and Loki were aliens who considered themselves ‘demigods’. Still problematic, but nowhere near the crusade they would be facing if they dropkicked the hornet’s nest of faith.

“Apropos,” Tony said to distract himself, “turns out you’re still a wanted criminal. I was hurt that helping me doesn’t warrant some goodwill, but then I was kind of worried that if I asked they would label me a criminal, too, and I’d have to go on a run again. Don’t take this personally, Popsicle, but it really sucked last time.”

Loki shrugged. “Your survival was more of a priority than your comfort. You mortals are woefully resilient.”

Tony placed his tools back into the Leatherman and kept only the screwdriver he needed to replace the panel. The circuitry was fine, otherwise JARVIS would have organized a repair way before there was a danger of failure.

“Shall I cease in my visits?” the god asked in that tone that suggested he wasn’t going to do what he was told, but he was somewhat interested in what the other side’s opinion might be.

“This-” Tony waved his hand to encompass the situation, “-is surreal. You’ve tried to kill me, actually you tried to kill me about ten yards from here, and I think I’m broken because I’m not worried about it. You’re a supervillain.” Context. Right. “It was okay when we were off Earth. I
mean, I get it. Space Prince morality. That’s fine and dandy and I don’t have a fuck to give. But down here – the rules are different.”

“Oh, are they?” Loki quirked an eyebrow and moved to survey the sprawling, glittering beautiful mess of night-time New York. “It’s so hard to notice all these laws you create and abolish, when your life lasts but the length of a candle’s burning. Mere poultry, if you must.”

Tony rolled his eyes, although his effort was wasted, since Loki wasn’t looking his way. “And that’s why they don’t matter on an inter-realm scale, I said I got it.” He went inside through the open glass doors and came back with a second glass, monologueing: “But down here they matter. Every single one of them. And on the planetary scale you are a mass-murderer. So, riddle me this – shouldn’t I be fighting you?”

Who was really the enemy here? Tony refused to be anyone’s pawn, so he had to figure this out for himself. Just, having Fury and Coulson lie to them was a whole different jar of maggots to having the god that killed Coulson around. Tony was glad Agent Zombie had turned up before Loki, so most of that dilemma was moot.

“Or, at least,” he amended, “not offering you another drink?”

Before Loki could do so much as make a show of his magnanimity, Tony was already pouring him said drink. That wasn’t the question. He wasn’t even really questioning what to do; he was mostly only confused by how he was supposed to feel about it.

“Ten years ago, would you have cared?” inquired the god of change that really should have understood the concept of change and why the answer to his question was utterly irrelevant.

“Ten years ago, the Army would be gunning you down with weapons with my name on them.”

“How quick you are to absolve yourself and point fingers, Merchant of Death,” Loki quipped, but accepted his drink without any protests, even deigned to drink it.

“See?” Tony gestured widely, sloshing alcohol over the panels. “I know you’re trying to provoke me, but for once I actually have a valid answer. The Avengers have all done really, really crappy things in the past, and all of us regret them. All of us have pledged our lives to protecting the people now. I think maybe we’re hoping for absolution, but personally I don’t believe in it.” He looked over the roofs and the skyscrapers and the streets and the myriad of objectively tiny lives inside them. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you don’t actually mean to repent and become a protector of Midgard.”

“Certainly not.” Loki appeared affronted by the mere idea.

“So, the point stands. You’re a villain, and I’m betraying my friends and my fool’s hope of absolution by hosting you.”

Tony leaned down for the bottle and poured each of them a new round. He mimed a toast without saying anything. Really, what could he have said? He felt warmed – from the inside by the alcohol, from the outside by Loki’s magic that enveloped him and seemed to protect him from the chilling wind.

“Are you familiar with the biblical myth about Lucifer?” asked Loki.

“Satan?”

“No,” Loki hissed. “Lucifer. Light-bearer. Morning Star.” This must have meant something
personal to the guy; there was no other reason for the touchiness. “Before he Fell, he was God’s son. His best son – a favorite in some ways. In other ways, not.”

Okay, this was sounding uncomfortably familiar.

“Just for the record, you talking Christianity blows my mind.”

“Hm.” Loki sipped, too distracted by his contemplation to remember to show his distaste. “Lucifer was an Angel. He loved God, and basked in his love. But then… then God created Man. And Man was such a dumb, pathetic little creature, crawling in mud and snivelling, but God still ordered the Angels to serve it. Them, who were the first, who had been faithful and loyal for all this time, had become secondary to God’s new favorite.”

Still sounding familiar.

“So old Luce decided to fuck it, better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven?”

Loki scowled at him. “So Lucifer went to God, and explained to him what he was feeling. And he asked for God’s love.” The scowl deepened. “God cast him out.” He remained silent for a while (Tony didn’t feel like risking his life by interrupting) and eventually his expression cleared somewhat. “I feel odd kinship with this mythical being.”

Yeah, no wonder, Tony thought. On the other hand, from what little he recalled, that story hadn’t gone exactly as Loki had just told it.

“I’m fairly sure you interpreted that pretty heavily. Not that I care. I’m still contentedly atheist, despite the god sitting on my couch. Or standing on my launch pad.” Or possibly ending in my bed one day, he didn’t add, but the sneaky thought still rattled around his skull. Why oh why was he always so driven to the riskiest endeavors? “Besides, wanting to be loved has always been a sin. You could count yourself lucky it took you this long to find out.”

They both chuckled, mirthless.

“It surprises me, too. Especially since I’ve learned that beneath this thin veneer of Æsir radiance, I have always been a true monster.”

Tony turned just in time to see Loki morph from one hell of an attractive guy to a CGI special effect. He didn’t actually grow significantly, but gained an impression of bulkiness, and then he turned blue. Horns grew out of his forehead. Also blue. Not like the sticking-up golden set on his helmet (so fucking impractical, the guy’s primary weapon was said to be a lance or something, you needed to swing that over your head – just why?), but sort of curled to the back. Like a ram’s, almost.

“Way to illustrate who’s the Devil in our lives, Morning Star,” Tony said. He guessed that sounded sufficiently ‘so what?’ to not feed Loki’s internalized xenophobia any further.

“Oh please.” Blue Loki rolling his eyes took about fifty percent of the intimidating effect off of his new look. “My natural form may be adorned with a spectacular set of horns, but in pure malice your Director Fury wins without trying.”

Tony wished his brain would stop replaying Deepest Blue. He didn’t so much mind the soundtrack as such, but he suspected Loki was at least mildly telepathic, and a persistent ear-worm was a really stupid reason to die.
Probably unique, but still really stupid.

‘...I never hide my thoughts from you; you’re my deepest blue...’ Fuck it, really. He needed another drink. And another. And another until he would forget what it was he needed. Heh, ‘another’. And now he was thinking about Thor.

Thor must have flipped when he realized his estranged, crazy little bro was a Na’vi.

“Where did your mind go, Stark?”

“You ever seen a 3D movie?” Tony inquired. “Brace yourself. C’mon. I’ve got a private theatre for a reason, and the reason wasn’t originally to give an exoplanetary ex-royalty the motivation to stop going ‘round slaughtering us short-lived poultry, but it’s as good as any and better than what I’ve originally told Pepper. Don’t ask. It wasn’t pretty. Not one of my better moments.”

Loki glanced back toward the living room and his expression tightened. “I think I have overstayed my welcome. Be well, Stark. Enjoy the after-effects of the poisoning you’re committing upon yourself.”

He vanished into the thin air as though he had never been there. Quite possibly it had been just the holoastral projection thingy – though not astral, it wasn’t really about soul – except maybe it was, in a quantum way that was yet well beyond what Tony had learnt, and it meant redefining ‘soul’ and using it in a whole new context.

Astral, he thought.

Then Natasha came to a halt in the glass doorway, and for a while watched Tony stand there with one bottle and two glasses. Tony could practically see the cogwheels in her head turning.

He clenched his jaw and braced himself for defending his life choices-

“I can’t make him stop,” she said.

At first Tony thought she was telling him she couldn’t stop Loki from visiting. Of course she couldn’t. None of them could. Not even Thor could. And Tony wouldn’t have actually wanted them to, if they were able. Loki’s visits were non-disruptive as far as he knew, and actually... kind of... nice.

Then he realized she had been talking about Barton. Of course it was Barton. Her assassin twin, who had suddenly decided to turn into a complete douchebag where Tony was concerned. Not cool. Also not Natasha’s fault, and so far she hadn’t given Tony a reason to box her up with Barton in his mind.

“You’re not responsible for him,” he assured her.

Natasha came closer, close enough that she was more or less standing next to him. Right where a Norse deity had stood a very short while ago. “In far too many ways, we have been responsible for each other. For a long time now.”

“You and Barton and Agent Zombie?”

Natasha nodded. “And Nick.”

“Now I don’t know whose family is more fucked up. Yours or...” Loki’s, Tony meant, but it would have been such a very bad idea to say it out loud.
He was stunned – and suspicious – when Natasha hadn’t read his mind (even though she knew, she must have known) and instead filled in: “Yours, Stark? In this contest, you’d lose every time.”

Tony knew that he hadn’t really had it bad enough to garner any sort of pity from anyone. He didn’t want that. Hadn’t ever asked for it.

He had asked for other things (though mostly, admittedly, only in implications). He hadn’t gotten those either.

He missed Pepper, who could read him enough to make him smile once in a while. He missed Rhodey, but the U.S. refused to negotiate an armistice in the Middle East for the sole purpose of giving Tony’s friend a bit of downtime so he could drop by the Avengers Tower.

He missed… having a friend.

Tony woke up gasping in the middle of the night, palpating blindly for the arc reactor, which was there, of course, but under the covers. He kicked them off and the room was immediately bathed in blue light.

“Natasha wouldn’t really miss that Loki keeps visiting me, would she,” he asked, although he knew the answer.

“That would be very unlikely, sir,” JARVIS agreed.

It had taken Tony too fucking long, and he pleaded brain damage, because, shit, how hadn’t he realized that this all was happening inside his head the moment he had woken up in the penthouse with Pepper freaking out over him? How had that made sense, after the hazy Allfather court thingy?

Maybe he was still drunk of Asgardian mead and this was one weird-ass pre-hangover nightmare, but he wasn’t crossing his fingers.

We’ve only got this time to prove that together we can make it through… I’ll never hide my thoughts from you; you’re my deepest blue…

Likely as not this was some sort of dream quest where he was supposed to prove his worthiness or something equally as Viking-sounding and, whoa, had he torched that deal like a pro arsonist. He wished he would at least get to watch the pretty explosion.

Whoops.

What was this? Did he have a bonus life? How many times would he get to try?
Tony was fascinated with Barnes.

Okay, not so much with Barnes as with the way people around him were treating him and reacting to him and trying so very hard for him. Barnes himself was one tough, cool hardass, and Tony was pretty sure that he would have liked him except for the thing where people like Barnes tended to think Tony was lower than pond scum. It was a thing.

He didn’t get it.

…but if he had to guess, he’d have expected it to have something to do with how they liked Steve, and Tony was pretty much the opposite of Steve on the not-evil side of life.

“So,” Tony started intelligently, flopping down into an armchair next to the erstwhile Winter Soldier in the middle of a sedate Avengers-and-Affiliates party set up for the specific purpose of acclimating the worst case of POW known to history to the sight of other people before he was forced to attend an actual event.

“Indeed,” Barnes replied mock-sagely, nodding his head, not giving Tony the time to bust out the actual question he had been working up to.

Tony knew he would like him. He found himself smiling without his brain having given the order for the muscle movement.

“Good to see you in one piece.” Surprisingly, it genuinely was.

“Is it?” Barnes inquired, playing around with the straw in his drink, which he wasn’t drinking, only wielding as a weapon in the way Tony knew the experienced party-goers did. Barnes glanced to the side and very, very briefly met Tony’s eye.

Color Tony shocked. All that carefully orchestrated goodwill and supportive pussyfooting, and Barnes wasn’t feeling welcome? “I hate Cap pouting, and he was looking kinda disconsolate for a while there, so, yeah. I really don’t want to know how it would feel to see him cry. Probably make me want to jump off of my Tower.”

Barnes smiled ruefully, and for a moment Tony could imagine him in mismatched mud-stained fatigues as he shot the brains out of some Nazi to make sure they wouldn’t get the jump on Rogers.

“Little punk,” he said.

Tony snorted. Not so little, but he could see where Barnes was coming from. “Listen, I’ve been working on the tech for you-” he glanced at the Sargecicle’s gloved left hand (that didn’t work as well as ‘Capsicle’, but it still sort-of worked), “-and I’ve gotten as far as I could without taking some readings of you. D’you think you could-”

“Hi guys,” Steve quipped, standing above them, the mountain of muscle a caution in and of itself. “Tony, Bruce was looking for you. He’s by the bar. Try not to get too drunk, please?”

What…?

Tony glanced at the first glass of rum coke he was still nursing. He thought rum coke was disgusting, and that was the point. It took him a long time to drink it – he would sip, reaffirm how
horrible it was, then wait until he could convince himself that he didn’t remember it right and try
and sip again – so once the glass was empty he would feel entitled to remove himself from this
farce. He was pretty sure that would satisfy Captain BFF’s requirements.

Besides, Bruce wasn’t looking for Tony. He was being flirted at by Natasha, who meant it only
about as much as she ever meant it when she flashed her cleavage at Thor. It was probably
instinctual for her at this point. Just another day at work.

…but if Steve wanted to be alone with his boo (never mind that it killed the entire point of the
party) Tony could take a hint and give them their very relative privacy.

“Don’t worry, Boy Scout Classic,” he said, getting up. “I haven’t been asking your man Barnes
here any uncomfortable questions. Okay,” he corrected himself, “not many uncomfortable
questions. Besides, he’s a big guy. He can tell me to go fuck myself.”

Steve watched him with gimlet eyes. “You’re an ass, Tony.”

Again, what…?

Tony backed away, eyes flitting from one WWII veteran’s face to the other. Had he missed
something? Was there some unspoken don’t-talk-to-Barnes rule? Because that would go over well
once the reporters got near the guy. Or was it just that Tony constituted a threat to Barnes’ well-
being?

Sure, Tony could be abrasive, but Barnes had seemed fine, and Steve’s protectiveness was just
unnecessary and excessive.

“ Heard you wanted to talk to me,” he snapped at Bruce in the middle of Natasha’s suggestive
phrase Nr 1023 of the Little Spy’s First Big Handbook of Seduction Techniques.

Bruce turned to him, face plummeting all the way from content and amused to alarmed. “What?”

“I agree,” Natasha said, readying herself for a fight, “what?”

“That’s what I’ve come over here to find out.” Tony slammed his glass into the counter way
harder than necessary.

Natasha shifted, not quite radiating homicidal vibes yet, but freeing her arm so she could reach for
a weapon.

“I sent you an email,” Bruce admitted. “But it’s not anything urgent, and I wasn’t going to pull you
away from what you were doing. Just come by whenever you have the time. Uh…” he glanced at
the spy that had been making eyes at him. “Maybe not right now?”

“Perfect,” Tony hissed and turned around to lean back against the counter. He cast the darkest look
he could at the back of Steven Protector Rogers, who was presently trying to explain something to
Barnes in hushed, urgent tones.

Barnes looked about as receptive as a stone wall. He looked over, met Tony’s eyes and shrugged
helplessly.

Tony nodded back; not-apology not accepted, but at least he was pretty sure Barnes was also a
victim in this set-up.

He wondered what it would be like if he tried to invite Loki. Funny, how lately that was the person
to whom his thoughts turned more often than not. Pepper had been invited and declined in favor of some sort of allegedly SI-related business in Dubai – Tony had tuned her out, he didn’t care about the details – and she had taken Happy with her, naturally.

Rhodey was here… somewhere. Tony looked over the penthouse. There. The heart of the crowd, always the party animal, that was Rhodey. He looked like he was having fun.

And Tony was going to fuck it up for him. Fuck it up for Rhodey, fuck it up for Barnes, fuck it up for Bruce and for Natasha, who had briefly seemed like she was letting her hair down, too. He was going to fuck it up for them all, because they were here and he wasn’t. Not completely. A very big part of him was somewhere off in Wonderland or through the Looking Glass, maybe stuck in the Ice Villa where Loki had interred him, or dissolved in alcohol, or just plain dead.

Steve was right to keep him away from Barnes-

“Tony?” he heard Bruce’s urgent voice.

“Stark?” Natasha, too, sounded concerned.

It was wrong. All wrong. They were supposed to be laughing over some light-hearted flirting, not worrying over a complete mess of a modern-day Koshchey that had lost his sheep and now cried for attention over a spilt glass of booze… and mixed his metaphors.

He grabbed an artfully arranged slice of Death by Chocolate (unintentional, not meant that way) from the tray and crossed the room to Steve in deliberate, stomping steps, attracting the attention of most of the people around.

Steve turned to face him with a defensive expression, like he thought that Tony was going to call him out on lying. Like he thought that Tony believed anybody would care that Steve lied to him.

Tony pushed the dessert into Steve’s hands. Steve caught it reflexively and looked down on it in confusion.

“Wha-”

“Your cake,” Tony informed him. “Have it. Eat it.”

He turned around and stomped away. That would have to do for a burn. If it had happened in public, it would make front pages tomorrow, but no one here would sell the story to the papers, and Tony would have to do with the knowledge that he had fucked it all up way less than he could have.

Pepper would have eaten him alive for this but Pepper wasn’t here.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Steve say to Barnes. “He wasn’t that bad before. I don’t know what…” There was a pause and some shuffling. “…happened to him.”

Tony jumped into the elevator and kept his back to the door while it closed. He was sure Rhodey had only just not made it inside after him.

“Workshop, Jay. Blackout. Complete. Bruce can wait until tomorrow, I’m sure.”

Tony ventured out the next day toward the evening, after he had fielded a phone call from Pepper
that lasted twenty minutes but went along the lines of:

“Steve tattled like a little tattletale that you were being mean to him yesterday in front of all his friends.”

“He started it.”

“Tony, I told you that we must be nice to each other.”

“Why don’t you tell Steve? He really started it.”

“Steve is a good boy, and besides, I talked with Natasha, too. I know what happened.”

“I gave him cake.”

“You made him sad. Go and apologize. I mean it, Tony. Natasha will tell me if you don’t.”

By the time he entered the penthouse, which had been turned back into a living room over the course of the day, he came to the conclusion that the conversation had perfectly illustrated the reason why Pepper and he had split. Sometimes Tony liked it when people treated him like an adult person.

Sometimes Pepper would have liked it if he didn’t react to her coaching by reverting into a kindergartener.

“Sir,” JARVIS warned him.

What looked like the official roster of the Avengers minus Rhodey was standing lined up between him and the bar.

Tony took a deep breath. “Let me do this on my own, okay Jay? I am a big boy.” Or so Pepper assured him.

“As you wish, sir-”

“Have you been speaking with Loki?” Steve shot at Tony before it even occurred to Tony that he might need cover.

Tony froze. That wasn’t the conversation he had been expecting. If anything, he had anticipated to go another round about the evils of alcohol.

After the phone call with Pepper, the first response that occurred to him was ‘Natasha told’. He managed to not let it out, but the look he gave her was probably eloquent enough.

“Tony,” Steve started in his patented placating tone, “we know that you have been through a lot and-”

And that was fucking enough.

“Yes,” Tony agreed, cutting off whatever party line garbage his illustrious leader had been about to spew. “Yes, I have been speaking with Loki. He has been coming by.” Though only Loki himself knew why. Tony was great company, but not that great.

“What the fuck do you mean he’s been coming by?!?” Barton exploded. “Here?!”

So Natasha hadn’t told. Huh. He wondered how they knew then.
“Yes. _He_ comes to see _me_, and _I_ am _here_, so _he_ comes _here._” To Tony this seemed like trivial logic, but maybe some people needed more time to process something so complicated.

Barton went red, then white, and then Natasha kicked his feet from under him, which made him sit down. She gave him a loaded look when he made to get up.

“Oh god, Tony,” Steve sighed, covering his eyes with his hand. “Why didn’t you say anything? We could have done something. Called Thor at the very least…” He let the hand down and looked at Tony imploringly. “That explains why you have been so… unpleasant lately. You must have been under a lot of stress. Just, why didn’t you say anything? We’re supposed to be a team.”

Tony was embarrassed for him.

He noticed that Barnes wasn’t present, probably packed away somewhere in wool to protect him from the stress of watching the alleged team gang up on one of their alleged team members.

He searched for the right words to say in this situation. ‘Loki is the least stressing person in my life right now’ sounded nice. Also ‘don’t talk to me about team, because I _have_ been going through a lot lately, you’re right, but I haven’t seen an ounce of support from any one of you bastards’ seemed like an option. Not entirely fair, though. Bruce had been supportive.

“You punched me in the face,” was what came out instead. No wonder Pepper kept trying to mother him.

“You deserve to get punched in the face,” Barton growled, though he didn’t move in deference to Natasha’s pain-inflicting skills. “A lot. Fucking traitor.”

“Khvatit!”

“That’s enough, Clint,” Steve agreed. But only for about two seconds, before he turned to Tony with: “Loki is a wanted criminal. He killed hundreds of people, and he keeps blowing things up—”

“But really, lately,” Bruce pointed out, earning another scoop of Tony’s love.

“-and harming innocents. We still don’t know if he wasn’t behind the last alien invasion—”

“That’s bullshit!” Tony insisted, but of course that’s what he would have said if he had been brainwashed.

“-and he abducted you for three months.”

To protect me, Tony thought. To protect me, because he had seen enough of how you treat anyone who looks like a criminal, and didn’t think it was fair to put me through it. Because he owed me, and acknowledged it, and acted according to it, which is more than can be said for you lot.

“Loki has been tried and punished for his crimes,” Tony said. “I was on Asgard; I’ve seen the tribunal.” Perhaps those were two different occasions, but why quibble? “Maybe you disagree with the verdict, but that is your problem.” He looked at the whole group, one by one, because this one wasn’t just about Steve. “That’s the way law works. The way it’s supposed to work. We should all be subject to it, too, regardless of additional powers or funny costumes or shiny writing on the side of our house.”

Barton scoffed. “So his daddy slapped his wrist, said it’s okay now, and he’s free to go and _enslave_ someone again whenever he finds another planet to conquer?”
“He was punished,” Tony replied. Lightly, far too lightly in Tony’s opinion. But then, Tony was on the angry victim’s side, and seeing the crime from the point of view of another angry victim wasn’t as much struggle as he expected. Loki wasn’t the villain. And even if he had been, that wasn’t the point.

“So,” Tony jauntily clapped his hands and smiled wide, “conventionally we try to kill the villain, but occasionally we about kill ourselves to rehabilitate them. But sometimes when we save them it’s an act of mercy and sometimes it’s an act of treachery, depending on what Steven Rogers says.” Now he was glad that Barnes wasn’t there, because Barnes was another villanized angry victim, and he probably didn’t need to hear this. Or maybe he did, in which case there would be the recording. “You people say I have an ego – but the fuck is that? If I didn’t make it obvious, this guy-” he jabbed his finger in the air in the direction of the Cap’s chest, “-usurps for himself the spot of the judge supreme. Based on what? Getting deep-frozen in World War Two?”

“Well, you have to admit that Steve isn’t exactly the worst judge of people,” pointed out Wilson, who up until now had tried to stay out of any conflict involving Tony on the basis that he didn’t know Tony enough.

“Everybody likes him,” said Quicksilver, who was suddenly just there. “Even the bad people.”

“It’s got to be hard for him to notice somebody’s evil if they act like his friend,” added his sister. She sounded like she spoke from experience.

There was a moment while the core group of Avengers worked out whether the newcomers really were eligible to speak at team meetings, and then a consensus was achieved – or at least so Tony assumed when gradually everyone turned to him.

Also a way of uniting a team. He wondered if giving them a common enemy was more or less effective than killing off their common friend.

“And now you’re all looking at me.” Tony was just so very glad that Rhodey had gone home and wasn’t here to play at peacekeeper. This apparently needed to be talked out. “Like that was about me. Fantastic. Spectacular. I’m evil now. Despite the fact that I’ve never once pretended to be the Dick America’s friend.” He was Steve’s friend. Or tried to be, as best as he could. “Fuck you all very much.”

“That’s not what they meant, Tony!” Steve protested.

“I thought your adoptees put it pretty concisely.”

Scarlet or what was her name even nodded to confirm that Tony had understood her accusation correctly.

“Why didn’t you tell us about Loki?” Bruce asked, a flash of rationality cutting through all those raised tempers. He was a gift. And, judging by his expression, he already knew the answer to his question, but he also knew that the others didn’t know and therefore it needed to be asked, like an actual question rather than Steve-style emotional manipulation.

“Because I knew you would do this,” was the simple answer. Tony saw their faces shut down, one by one, and decided that fuck it, he might as well get hung for the whole Asgardian ewe. “He’s not any worse than thousands other people. You never even hear about most of them, the bullied, friendless kids whose parents don’t have time for them, or are just bullies themselves. Most of them aren’t smart enough for anything worse than some passive aggression, TP-ing the bully’s house or setting it on fire at worst. Prisons are full of people like that. It’s the smart ones they call
us in for – like Lucy with her remote-controlled plane in the sky with diamonds or Simon, the really, truly last of the Mohicans. We still try to save them.”

And the Lucies and the Simons ended up dead, more often than not, because the Iron Man still didn’t know his strength and couldn’t play softly enough for the tiny fragile ones.

Tony rubbed his face with his hands and then looked up at what was meant to be his team, but wouldn’t ever, ever be. He felt the pack bonds tying them together break as he faced their collective disapproval for one too many times.

“Really,” he went on speaking, because what did it matter now? It didn’t. “-the only difference between these guys and Loki is that Loki’s smarter, tougher and more powerful – and also that he can imagine the consequences of his actions and consequently mostly doesn’t fuck up anything he can’t unfuck again.”

The Avengers stared at him, quiet and not so much contemplative as judgmental.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, I know that is more than one difference, but-”

“You just said it, Tony,” Steve cut him off, trying oh-so-hard to stamp down his exasperation. He looked like he was on the verge of punching Tony in the head again, to make sure that this sudden, unexpected bout of magnanimity from Tony wasn’t in fact mind-control. “Loki is aware of the consequences of his actions.”

They weren’t hearing him, Tony realized.

“It’s difference of scale,” he muttered. And Tony knew he was overambitious, it all came down to his ego being inflated well past all rational limits, but he was going to damn well think on a bigger scale than just the Earth. He nostalgically thought of Fury. Now there was a hardcore bastard that could look at a nuke with the force to destroy half the planet and leave the other half to rot slowly, and think ‘insufficient’. Because he had perspective.

Not like these Lemmings. Sure, they wore pretty costumes, but they were all locked in the constructs they made for themselves (to not go insane, admittedly) based on what they did. Black Widow thought in terms of spying and impersonating and information trade where the whole world was a chessboard and a battlefield. Hawkeye wasn’t so much a 2D guy – he went for the up and down, thinking in radians and the technical side of hitting a person, relying on other people to sort out the world outside of the computer game (sniper simulator?) for him. Steve was a hero down to his bones; he entered himself into every precarious situation he found with the solemn intention of making the best of it, forcing people to be fair to one another and saving the ideals of the America that had only ever existed in his head.

Then there were the extras, who mostly just looked up to Steve and still hadn’t figured out that he was only alive to preach because the Erskine & Stark team had made him pretty much indestructible. Ninety percent of Rogers’ specialness was plain pig-headedness.

Bruce… Bruce was an escapist and an escape artist in every sense of the word. He invented a way of escaping from the reality by handing the reins over to his Id, and when that got fucked for him by said Id manifesting in an unignorably green fashion, he relocated to the asscrack of India. Case in point.

But now he was here, and he was trying – god knew why (only he probably didn’t either, Tony would have to ask the next time Loki dropped by for a nightcap) but he was.
“It’s funny,” Tony said. It was funny how they all with the exception of Bruce were a bunch of hypocrites when it suited them. Barton also excluded, just this once, because getting mind-controlled into attacking his colleagues earned him a bunch of free passes. On being a hypocrite, not on having thrown Tony’s attempt at friendship into his face after wiping his ass with it.

“It’s really not,” announced Coulson, striding into the room as if he owned it. “Go and sleep it off, Stark, and the next time I see you drunk, I will let Barton lace your coffee with laxatives. God knows he wants to.”

Tony went before someone alerted Coulson to the fact that this intervention wasn’t about his drinking habits. He made his way right back to the workshop and tasked JARVIS with monitoring the frequencies.

If they decided to take him into custody, as a criminal or as a mentally impaired person, he wanted to have enough warning to vacate the premises.

Tony hadn’t been this irritable in a while. Abrasive, yeah, that was him on a bad day. Pepper would probably say on a good day too, but no, on a good day he mostly didn’t have to talk to people enough to get to that irritating stage.

The way he felt today – like there was another him just under his skin itching for a fight, trying to rend its way through his guts outside so it could claw someone’s face off – would have made sense if he had been really fucking hungry.

“Time and specifics of my last meal, Jay?”

“Discounting a staggering amount of coffee and the smoothie Dummy prepared for you…”

There was a brief pause while they both tacitly acknowledged that Tony hadn’t had more than two gulps of the smoothie, and also that JARVIS had likely saved Tony’s life by preventing him from drinking the rest of it.

“…your last meal would have been lunch at half past one, consisting of a sandwich, a bag of potato chips and a carrot.”

“A carrot?” Tony repeated, trying to remember that. He couldn’t. He decided that was probably a good thing.

On the other hand, while not particularly healthy, the amount of food was more than sufficient to make him feel human afterwards. If it hadn’t helped…

Frankly, the only thing Tony could think of was withdrawal. Not from alcohol, though – he had experienced enough of that to know how very different it was (thank you, Ten Rings, going cold turkey in a cave in the middle of a desert was just what the doctor would have ordered). But then Tony unexpectedly found himself at a loss. He hadn’t been abusing any other substances.

At least, none that he had been aware of.

He momentarily entertained the thought that someone had managed to sneak past his security measures and poison his coffee. It might have been possible. He wouldn’t have put it past Agent Walking Dead… but then, what would have been the purpose?

To keep Tony malleable?
If so, it had been more of a flop than he could imagine Robot Zombie ever suffering. Not to mention the fact that whatever Coulson wanted he could have gotten by either waving his taser about, or making eyes at the respective person in power – whether that be Steve or Pepper.

Barton, on the other hand, could have done it for kicks.

Except that JARVIS would have had him well-roasted for it.

Tony was honestly stumped.

And then someone knocked on the currently opaque glass wall of the workshop, and Tony was unently ripped from his contemplation, crashing back to Earth and still at the teeth-gnashing stage of impotently hating everything because his glands were rebelling against the rest of his body.

“Sergeant Barnes, sir,” JARVIS said.

“Okay,” Tony muttered, “didn’t expect that one. Is he looking more homicidal than usual?”

“I do not estimate he means you harm.”

Tony shrugged. “Then let him in, cupcake.”

Barnes shuffled inside, hunched-shouldered; he seemed to expect that Tony would chuck him right back out, despite the fact that Tony had issued him an invitation. It might have gotten cut off by Rogers, but it hadn’t been rescinded.

Barnes looked like the kind of guy that was used getting the blame for his best friend’s messes, simply because Rogers had a set of eyes that could make angels weep and little kids give him their candy, and he knew how to use them.

“Come on, Barnes, you’re a big bad superhero, stop slouching.”

Tony nearly cringed when he heard himself. Was Pepper contagious? He needed to do something to stop feeling like he was shedding his skin. Was he shedding his skin? The media did call him cold-blooded, but as far as he knew he was still a mammal?

“You said you needed something from me,” Barnes explained.

“Sit.” Tony indicated a place on a bench, and went to get the stuff he had put together so far. It was already pretty mind-blowing.

“I wasn’t sure you were still going to make it,” Barnes admitted. Implying ‘because my friend was a dick to you’.

Tony shrugged and presented the cable-trailing viscera of the future arm. It looked a little like a flesh-eating monstrous alien invader from a dungeon dimension, and Barnes gave it an alarmed look. Not quite frightened, but very ready to try and put up a fight, should it start waving any tentacles in his direction.

“I am going to finish it. As long as they don’t lock me up. So if you could lose a good word for me with your buddy…”

Barnes sighed. “I can try. He’s intractable on the best of days, but maybe I can still milk the resurrection.”

The corners of Tony’s mouth twitched a bit. He hadn’t expected that.
“Much appreciated. Now brace yourself. This shouldn’t hurt, but you never know-”

A couple hours later Barnes was leaving, and Tony felt a little less like he would explode; his brain buzzed with numbers.

“Thank you,” said the Early Spring Soldier.

Tony paused, bent over the arm’s innards. He straightened and stared at the old-timer. “Sure. Uh… what for?”

Barnes gaped right back like Tony was slow. “Taking me in? Housing me, clothing me, feeding me – and Steve – medical care, therapists, safe place to sleep for fuck’s sake-”

Tony thrust both hands in front of himself, palms-out. The tweezers landed on the floor with a muffled clatter. “Okay, stop. Stop.”

Barnes spread his arms. “You just gave me an entire fucking life. Just handed it over and told me it’s mine, and I didn’t have to do anything for it. I didn’t even have to fucking ask. I sure as fuck didn’t deserve it-”

“You have an unexpectedly filthy mouth.”

That derailed Barnes completely. He snorted. “Ma would have washed it out with soap, if we coulda spare the little soap we had.”

“Bad news, badboy.” Tony waggled his eyebrows. “There’s plenty of soap everywhere around here.”

“So I found out.” The ex-Sergeant shuddered. “I’ve asked your Jarvis to alert me if Stevie is within earshot so I don’t have a repeat of that experience. The punk was always pretty scrappy, but since your Da blew him up I actually can’t get away even if I really try.”

Tony was struck by the realization that for the first time since he got to know Bruce he had actually met a human being he genuinely liked. Well, so far.

“Okay. Jay, is washing out someone’s mouth with soap safe? Because that sounds suspect.”

“Unless an extreme amount of the product is ingested, the risks are limited to indigestion, sir. In case of Sergeant Barnes, the risks are further reduced due to his enhanced biology.”

“Alright. We’ll leave Mama Rogers alone about it. I don’t want to get into an argument with that guy. He’s got a mean right hook. And probably a mean left hook, too – I don’t wanna find out personally.” They were headed that way, and even though Tony wasn’t exactly scared, he dreaded that collision. “And you, Robocop – save the genuflection. I do that stuff for everyone around here. No one makes a big deal of it.”

Barnes scowled. “You mean… no one thanked you for it.”

Tony scoffed and dismissively flapped his hand, beating a hasty retreat behind his workbench. He wasn’t going to be subjected to more kowtowing. He lived here; this was supposed to be a safe, kowtowing-free zone.

Even if he couldn’t entirely suppress the thought that the answer to Barnes’ non-question was
Tony was pumped up. Science! Science was fun, even regular, high-school kind of science like the Iron Man armor or Bucky Barnes’ future arm. He could take a break from serious studying and enjoy himself with the kiddie stuff.

So he went to Bruce’s lab to find out what the question was.

Before Bruce, he had never known how much fun you could have with vulcanization and Star Trek puns and a nerd-friend that didn’t even point out that you had been a huge poohead yesterday.

But when Bruce looked up from his smoking beakers, a pipette in one hand and a set of funny protective eyewear hiding half his face, the illusion broke. Bruce’s mouth turned downward, like a sad emoji’s. His eyes moved to the glass in Tony’s hand.

Tony hadn’t realized he had been drinking. He had done it automatically while focused on science.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he pre-empted, frantically looking for some place to stash the glass where it wouldn’t be in Bruce’s view and wouldn’t contaminate anything.

“You don’t,” Bruce assured him. He moved onto the next smoking beaker and dropped a drop from the pipette into it.

“Do too.” Tony would have had to drink a lot more to forget about the aggressive alcoholic father thing. “Believe it or not, this wasn’t why Pepper broke up with me.”

Bruce shrugged, although he still kept his back to Tony. “I thought that was the Iron Man? You went a long way to make it sound like Pepper was in too much danger and there was some difference of life philosophy.”

“Yeah no.”

“That sounds like there’s a story,” the green bean finished with the last beaker in the row, put his tools and containers away safely and then finally turned, so Tony could try and get a bead on his expression.

It looked a little cloudy, but with a reasonable chance of sunshine.

“Spoiler alert, Brucie-bear – in an unexpected plot twist, it was actually me breaking up with Pepper, not her getting fed up and kicking me to the curb. And before you begin the angst-fest, it wasn’t even really about my deep-seated insecurities and infamous issues with self-worth.”

“You don’t have issues with self-worth,” Bruce informed him, and held out a cup of coffee.

Between two scientists, one of whom didn’t even drink coffee, that was, like, the ultimate generosity.

Tony took the cup and cradled it and smelled it. It was terribly nice. And Tony was a terrible human being, because if he thought it through, the only reason why Bruce even kept coffee in his lab was that Tony turned up there so often in a state when he needed it (mostly either drunk or hungover).

“Right,” he muttered. It was possible that he deserved to be drawn and quartered.
“You have issues with taking responsibility for things that belong on other people’s conscience,” his possibly best friend assured him. “But that is neither here nor there-”

“It wasn’t about that.” Tony had no idea why he had never talked about it. The break-up had been surprisingly amiable considering the standard level of high-strung in their lives. “It was… I’ve been in unhealthy relationships, Bones. I know what they’re like and – hey, don’t look at me like that. I’ve tried out commitment. It’s never actually worked out well for me, though.”

“You and Pepper are good friends.” Bruce smiled, showing off the cutest crows’ feet known to man. “You trust each other.”

“To a point,” Tony allowed. A big, vital point labeled with the initials S and I. He took a seat on the ratty couch Bruce refused to part with no matter how often Tony snuck furniture catalogues into his inbox. “I’m childish and irresponsible and Pepper’s not, and she despairs of me, and at some point it seemed natural that she would leverage our relationship against me doing what she wanted me to do, company-wise. It’s not even like she wanted to control me. I don’t think it was deliberate.”

Bruce chuckled. “You’re pretty tough to control.”

Stark men were made of iron. Tony knew how hard that was to deal with. “She couldn’t control me. Not without going for the nuclear option and, yeah, I backed out before it turned into a world war.”

“That’s…”

“Stupid?” Tony suggested.

“Really not what I was expecting.” Bruce sat down next to him and sipped his vile concoction made of twigs and leaves and possibly flowers. “It’s wiser. Wiser? More mature? I get why you did it, and for what it’s worth, I believe you saved the both of you a lot of future hurt. Still, that kind of thing is notoriously hard to predict…”

Tony saved himself from having to answer by sticking his nose into the cup and pretending to still drink long after all the coffee was gone.

Eventually the excuse wore thin and he set the empty cup onto the couch and stood. “You said you wanted me to look at something?”

“Oh…” Bruce’s expression fell. “…I solved it yesterday. It just needed a little jolt of power, and I might have taken apart my electric razor, but JARVIS ordered me a new one, so…”

Tony could clearly see how hard Bruce was trying to come up with something Tony could do here that would be legitimately helpful and not just a pretext to loiter. The quick glance the biophysicist cast toward the ongoing experiment was what decided him.

“Don’t blow things up too much,” he mock-cautioned, and scarpered with a jaunty wave.

“Why do you keep doing this, Tony? By now you must know that alcohol effectively stops you from having any real fun.”

Tony opened his eyes. The ceiling was spinning. Whose idea was it to have lights two different colors? Oh yes – his. But why so many?
“Yeah,” he agreed. He felt kind of liquid on the inside. There was sloshing. It didn’t feel good. “But inside the moment it lets me believe that right now I’m having all the fun in the world.”

Someone crouched down with their back to the side of the armchair. They were carefully out of vomiting distance. The shoes, once Tony’s eyes managed to focus, were identifiably Bruce’s.

“Hey, Bee,” he said, grinning. “Explode anything?”

“Just a little bit.” Bruce was obviously humoring him, and that felt good, as opposed to sloshing. “I’m sorry the guys are giving you such a hard time about Loki.”

Obviously, Bruce thought that nagging him about alcohol was a lot more important.

“Get, get-get-get this,” Tony waved his hand illustratively, hitting the carpet a couple of times, because it was in the way. “Loki. Loki’s… like… blue.”

Bruce grabbed the flailing hand, spun under the arm and with a twist somehow pulled Tony up to a nearly vertical position.

“A Frost Giant, yes.”

That was exactly what Tony had been getting at. Or, perhaps, lumbering toward. Before he had been whirled around, and now had to battle his stomach’s desire to expel its contents. Eventually, drawing on years of practice, he won that fight.

“But he’s normal tall.”

“Yes,” Bruce agreed, waiting for the conclusion and shuffling along so slowly that Tony managed to somehow help propel his body along.

“So that makes him a Frost Dwarf, right?”

There was a groan that changed in the middle into an exasperated chuckle. “Left. Very, very left, Tony. I think you’re done for tonight.”

Apparently so. The elevator door blocked the sight of the bar, and Tony very much doubted anyone would bring him any booze if he asked.

Maybe, just maybe, they were right.

“Frost Midget,” Tony added just to hear Bruce laugh again. It was the nicest sound. Hoarse and criminally underused.

Huh, his bedroom. When did they get this far? Why was Bruce in his bedroom? Not that Tony didn’t have suggestions, he was full of suggestions, all suggestions all the time, but he was kind of not up for anything right now.

“If we find a Tony-cicle in your bed in the morning, I won’t even be surprised,” Bruce informed him dryly and upended Tony into his bed.

Tony raised his arms.

“C’mere, Big Guy. Gimme my radioactive cuddles.”

“That’s not funny, Tony.” That could have been believable, except for that part where Bruce snickered.
“It’s a little funny, cutie pie.” Or it would be, if Bruce was really here. But of course he wasn’t. This was all happening inside Tony’s head, and Tony had made up Bruce, inhumanly nice and larger than life and exactly the sort of person Tony would never, ever deserve to be around.

“What just happened?” The mattress dipped where the man sat down and took Tony’s wrist, not out of sentimentality but to measure heartbeat. Ever the doctor.

“Even before I died… there’s always this… this impression. Of un-re-a-li-ty,” Tony tried to explain, but already knew that he would fail; you had to experience it. He closed his eyes. “Like in the Discworld. Some things are realer. Some are less real. ‘s all just programming, an’ I’m just an avatar, an’ you’re either a CP or someone else’s avatar, an’ I can never tell the diff’rence. So that’s why I’ve to drink, Brucie. I almost think like I’m a part of this whole physics gig. Like the rules apply to me, sometimes.”

“Sometimes.”

Tony shrugged. “Nothing’s ever convinced me that the perceptible world is half’s real’s I am.”

“Wow.”

There was a while of silence, which Tony spent wishing he could have taken it all back. Damn alcohol.

“Not even…” Bruce didn’t finish, because he was a wet blanket. A very nice wet blanket, and warm, and fuzzy…

Warm fuzzy wet blanket.

Tony still knew what he meant, what they all meant, that was his life as people knew him, as the history would remember him, dates and places – almost died in Afghanistan in 2008, almost died in 2010 of palladium poisoning, almost died in 2012 taking a nuke into space, like a biannual look-at-me poor-little-rich-boy tantrum.

And Tony was scared sometimes, inside the claustrophobia of an unusually present moment, and he regretted the grief he caused Pepper, because Pepper was his beloved buoy, his dear dirigible, but when it came to him? He was just kind of curious what the design for the Game Over screen looked like.

x

The dreaded Friday came, and Coulson conspired with Pepper to make sure that Tony got dressed to the elevens (nines were for schmucks) and made his way to the hotel that hosted the gala. He kept hoping for an Assemble Alarm, but it was too much to ask.

Damn you, Simon, he thought as he entered the foyer with the high ceilings and the low-hanging chandeliers. Lyrics popped into his mind, and he grimaced at the idea of anyone swinging on one of those monstrosities. The glittering light cascaded over a tassel of shined-up society types. Tony seamlessly morphed into his public persona, but under the surface he couldn’t help wishing that things didn’t work like this – that every less than exemplary Avengers’ action didn’t have to be made-up for by a PR-positive event.

“Hey Cap,” he said with a grin toward the cleavage of the woman who had been interrogating Rogers, clapping the lug on the back. “How’s it going?”

Steve gave him a wooden smile and through clenched teeth pressed: “Goshdarn well.” It sounded
all the more vulgar for the amount of censure you could hear he was filtering it through.

“Mr Stark!” exclaimed the girl, all excited. Her eyes changed into cartoon-like dollar signs as she looked at him, bending her spine yet further to show off her assets to their full potential. “Sylvia Hochshorner.” She offered her hand like a limp fish. “We are so glad to have you!”

Tony was sure they were. He felt like he was being offered a second-hand car. He could actually see where they wound the odometer back.

He surreptitiously checked around himself for an info panel or something, so he’d have a clue what they were supposed to be supporting here. He could have asked, but he had been chastised in the past; apparently doing so might have been charmingly unacceptable when he had been a young cad, but was far too gauche for a superhero.

“Yes, yes-” He waved his hand at the mountains of frippery and gild around him. “-feeding the homeless, I’m all about feeding the homeless.”

“Mr Stark!” she exclaimed, appalled.

“You are welcome to take a leave if you do not wish to be here, Mr Stark,” spoke the man by her right, whom Tony had of course noticed, if only for his girth, but hadn’t considered interesting. “I assure you, no one has been asking for your presence here.”

“No,” Tony agreed, “you’re just interested in my money. But apparently you don’t need it enough to grit your teeth and spend five minutes listening to me bitch. And I’m not even asking anyone to hop into my bed.” No matter how hard Sylvia tried for that invitation. “What’s all this hoopla for, then?”

They stared at him with cartoonish affront. When no answer seemed to be forthcoming, and even Steve hadn’t recovered enough to try and shut Tony up, Tony decided to help them.

“Are you just spending an enormous amount of money for the purpose of begging an even more enormous amount of money out of these suckers?” He looked around.

Pepper appeared out of nowhere, using her special Stark-sense to detect when Tony was making too inexcusable an asshole of himself. She grabbed onto his elbow with her talons and hissed into his ear: “Tony Stark, I swear to God if you don’t shut up-”

“We’re not begging,” the man proclaimed haughtily.

Tony blinked at him, faux-confused. “Does the charity on that banner not mean what I think it means? It is the PC term for begging, right?” He turned first to the left at Pepper (who was trying to set him on fire with the power of her glare) then to the right at Steve.

“We are truly incapable of showing the slightest bit of sympathy to these people?” Steve said, quietly but with such raw disappointment and Tony wished Pepper had managed to set him on fire. It was bound to have hurt less.

But of course Steve didn’t understand. He believed in people. He believed in party lines. He believed that the rich should give to the poor automatically, that it was a god-given right of the poor to be given what the rich had actually worked for (and sometimes bled for and killed for).

He ignored the stabbing sensation around his elbow where Pepper worked really, really hard to make him retreat quietly and tried to explain it to Steve. “If I start showing sympathy to every Tom, Dick and Harry, this school of sharks will take me for everything I’m worth – and more –
within five minutes. I’ll be standing here with my bare ass hanging out. And so will you, because maybe you’ve forgotten, but I actually pretty much keep you. I pay for your everything.”

He remembered Barnes’ face when he had said ‘thank you’ and Tony didn’t know how to react to it.

“You have more than enough money to give to the poor,” Steve argued, blithely ignoring everything Tony had just told him. He gripped Tony’s right elbow, and helped Pepper drag him out.

Three guesses about the contents of tomorrow’s headlines.

They came to a halt just far enough from the reception counter to not be overheard by the stiffly smiling uniformed trio behind it. Pepper spun on her heel and hurried back inside to do damage control.

Steve let go and straightened, looking at Tony like Tony had personally betrayed him. Again.

Maybe Tony hadn’t been clear enough. “I am giving to the poor. A lot.”

“What was that?!”

“I am what I am-”

“Billionaire, playboy, alleged philanthropist- yes, Stark, I heard you the first time.” Steve sighed and raised his hand to cover his eyes.

“Like all poor people, Cap, you seem to suffer under the delusion that for us rich people, money does grow on trees. If you don’t like who I am, you’re welcome to go beg at somebody else’s doorstep.”

A passing couple caught a bit of his statement. The man appeared aghast; the woman looked like she knew exactly what Tony was talking about. It was nice to see gender roles reversed.

“These people need our sympathy, Mr Stark,” insisted Sylvia, who apparently didn’t understand the meaning of ‘excuse us’ and followed them to slime up to either Steve or Tony – and by ‘slime up’ Tony meant ‘get into their bed’.

He was done with their shit. Done.

He whirled around and snapped loudly: “You can pick: do you want my sympathy, or do you want my hundred thousand dollars?” He kept up the mockingly quizzical silence until the shocked breathlessness and nonverbal sputtering permeating the foyer abated, and just as his audience seemed on the verge of attempting to talk, he gave them a smug grin and eloquently put on his sunglasses.

He walked away a hundred thousand dollars poorer, but richer for it. Or so tomorrow’s news would (fail to) claim (when they could instead focus on another Stark scandal).
If they were kicking him off the Avengers, would it be a whole-team event?

Tony wasn’t sure. On one hand, it should be a collective decision. On the other, Steve wasn’t the type to go for maximum humiliation.

“I was surprised,” said Natasha when he dragged himself home, not expecting that any of them would still be awake. But they were. And they ambushed him. Ambushed him with a mug, it appeared – Natasha was handing him one.

A mug of hot chocolate.

...what?

“You were?” Tony inquired, and fished out a marshmallow. Sweet.

Steve heaved a sigh so heavy it must have strained even his supersoldier musculature. “See, Tony? Even Natasha-”

“You’re a consummate actor, Stark,” Natasha cut in, glancing at Steve in a very Pepper-ish way, like ‘go play outside for a while, dear, adults are talking’, “and this was completely artless. When did you start feeling so fed up with the fakeness you cannot muster the effort to lie? Worse yet, that their lies anger you?”

Tony shrugged. “I think, maybe around the time the asshole god of lies we used to fight cared more about my wellbeing than my alleged teammates. Sort of puts the truth thing into perspective.”

That didn’t receive the response he had expected. Even Barton looked placid, or perhaps a little bemused. He saluted with his own mug.

It was like they had all forgotten about Loki. Entirely.

“What about you, Mr Helping the Needful?” Tony asked Bruce, who was swaddled in a blanket in an armchair and pretending to mind his own business, which was entirely limited to the contents of his mug – a green one with ‘Mea navis aëricumbens anguillis abundat’ written on it, so likely gag-gifted to him by… hmm… Natasha? It sounded almost plausible. “Were you surprised?”

Bruce tore himself away from the secrets of cocoa and smiled wearily. “Not really. Maybe a little. Like Natasha.” He gave an apologetic shrug. “You’re usually less affected by the dishonesty of it all. Or better at hiding it.”

“I’m tired, Bruce,” Tony admitted. Tired in a terminal way.

“I know.” Bruce extended a hand, and somehow that translated into Tony taking a seat on the nearest piece of furniture, which was the coffee table. “I just don’t know how to help.”

Tony snorted. “Am I one of your needful?”

“If that’s how you want to see it,” Bruce dissembled.

“How do you see it?” Tony was genuinely curious. He didn’t even mind that the rest of the original band of siblings was listening in.
“I’m your friend.” Bruce tried to fold in on himself, as it was somehow embarrassing.

“So was Steve,” Tony’s mouth said without engaging his brain. Oh, whatever. That was going to come out sooner or later anyway, and better now than in the middle of a fight.

He waited for the sounds of protest.

Natasha cuffed the back of his head, so very lightly that he couldn’t misinterpret it as a smack no matter how hard he tried. And he didn’t try. He looked over instead and saw Cap pouting at a cap of whipped cream.

“Yeah no, Stark,” grumbled Barton. “You’re not going to feel all butt-hurt when you’ve made sure you gave as good as you got.”

Tony honestly didn’t think that Steve was even a little bit bothered about a stupid comment on the Helicarrier while under the influence of the scepter. Taking it too personally that Captain America thought he was a waste of oxygen (just like Howard had always predicted) was Tony’s problem.

Natasha gripped his shoulder, friendly-like but at the same time a steel-vice warning. “You proved you could go to sleep without drinking first. Try for a repeat tonight, okay?”

She took Barton with her when she left, and Steve hastily followed them after casting an awkward look in Tony’s and Bruce’s direction which… Correct Tony if he was wrong here, but that look seemed to imply things that weren’t even in the vicinity of truth.

“You wouldn’t act like this if he hadn’t hurt you,” Bruce remarked. “Do you usually hold grudges this long?”

“No.” Tony downed his chocolate. It was amazing. “I forget about shit when it stops hurting.”

He gave Bruce a hands-up and sent him off with a ‘good night, Fluttershy’. Then he reflected on Natasha’s directive and the fact that the only time in recent memory he fell asleep unmedicated was when Loki had lulled him into it…

And then he tried to get drunk off his rocker.

It didn’t work. At quarter to five he stared wide-eyed at the grey of the dawning rain-soaked day. Stone-cold sober.

After he had drunk his way through a bottle of whiskey and then, desperate, tried a little of everything else.

None of it affected him.

For the first time in a long, long while he felt so fucking sorry for Steve.

x

He thought, maybe he wasn’t doing it right. Maybe he was skimping, and that made somebody mad.

So he bought true, hundred percent genuine absinthe from the real, ancient absinthe-makers, and drank it. He drank a bit straight. Then he drank some with the burnt sugar. Then some with sugar solved in water. And some more with burnt sugar, simply because he liked setting stuff on fire.

A figure appeared then, seemingly formed out of green smoke. She looked poisonous, sitting there
on the edge of the island, naked as a wire stripped of isolation. She didn’t look like anyone he recalled; her eyes were empty like a statue’s. Her hipbones were sharp, but her thighs were fat.

Tony pulled himself up to his feet and slammed his hands down onto the counter, *through* the apparition’s fat thighs.

“Catch me if you can, boysenberry,” he snarled into her green, smoky, expressionless face, and staggered in the direction of the bedroom.

He couldn’t quite believe he could have gotten that far on his own, but on the next morning he had woken up in his bed, so he must have managed… somehow… right?

Another day, another Assemble Alarm.

Another *fucking* kid. This one had turned himself into what he claimed was a werewolf, based on some sort of MTV show for disaffected teens. Barnes walked straight across the parking tower where they had finally confined the mutated guy, gave him a smack that crashed him into the floor and promised him such a bare-butt spanking that he would be too ashamed to meet anyone’s eyes for months.

Tony could see how that guy could sometimes, maybe, a little, manage Rogers.

Casualties: zero. Property damage: negligible.

Conclusion: another of Coulson’s PR stunts that could have been easily managed by SHIELD and had been given to the Avengers for the sole purpose of improving their stats.

The team went for some grub and ice cream afterwards, dragging the idiotic lycanthrope with them. Tony didn’t feel like celebrating; his mind insisted on extrapolating how the whole thing would have gone if Barnes hadn’t been there – if it had been Tony sent into the confrontation, they would have had a corpse on their hands instead of feeding ice cream to a kid that just needed to find some friends to play CoD – or, more likely WoW – with.

Tony shut himself in the garage, talked to JARVIS for a bit and along the way managed to displace the contents of a whiskey carafe. Into his stomach.


Bruce found him beating the shit out of an F-TYPE convertible. He stood at the entrance to the garage and gaped as things crunched and groaned and crashed under the force of an applied baseball bat.

“Tony.” Bruce came closer once the baseball bat was safely thrown inside the demolished car. “We’re losing you, and I hate it.”

“Of course you’d hate to lose me. You adore me,” Tony said glibly.

“You goddamn liar,” Bruce breathed, refusing to blithely disbelieve what his eyes were telling him. “And you almost got me with this act, too. You pretend you’re so cocky it doesn’t even occur to you that anyone might not love you, but expect everyone to hate you anyway. Hate you and want to use you.”

“Oi, Bruce.” Tony laughed – not a joyful laugh but one of those horrible, guttural, mirthless affairs.
“Can it with the armchair shrinking shtick. You said yourself you weren’t that kind of a doctor.”

“It’s all an act.” Bruce looked like he wanted to laugh but the horror of the realization froze his diaphragm. “All of it. You insane maniac have built a mask for yourself out of brutal sincerity.”

Tony downed a glass of whisky that to his organism was basically just soap water. “You’ve got to admit it’s ingenious.”

“It’s genius,” the other resident genius confirmed. He hung his head, defeated. “Except… there’s no way I could ever convince you that I do actually care about you.”

“Of course you do, Bruce,” Tony replied with a razor-sharp, lightning-quick grin. “It’s natural. I gave you accommodations, safety, labs, legitimacy, time, means, money… almost everything you ever could have wished for. I restored your agency to you. There’s no way you could be indifferent to me.” If he had a heart it would have broken at the sight of his friend’s face. “But don’t try to pretend like you don’t resent me for having all that to give without ever having to fight for it. I was born into it. It fell into my lap.”

“I think you’re missing one key detail, Tony. Not everybody’s Obadiah Stane.”

Bruce was right. In a way. And it might have worked, except there was Steve Rogers in Tony’s mind’s eye, huffing and puffing and blowing down Tony’s house of cards. The eternal conviction of the poor that they have greater right to the money of the rich, because they need it more.

Communism.

“You’re right,” Tony admitted. And then he dealt another verbal blow, going for the soft tissue. “There is Rhodey and Pepper. There’s Jay and Dummy, but I’m not sure they count as people-”

“Of course Jarvis counts as people,” Bruce snapped, completely ungreen but seemingly as pissed as ever. “I don’t know Dummy enough to tell, but he’s yours, so I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“Fuck you,” Tony hissed, pulling a shard of glass out of his forearm and batting away Bruce’s hand when he reached over to examine the injury. “I’ve given you all I ever meant to, Bruce, and I gave it freely. You take it, or you’re welcome to fuck off.”

And he ran.

He ran and hid, and initiated a blackout, because he knew Bruce was tougher than that, couldn’t be scared off by a rant, no matter how cruel.

JARVIS didn’t comment, but he did passive-aggressively leave him a clip from the security camera of what looked like a war council around the kitchen table.

“I might have underestimated how damaged he actually is,” Natasha said tonelessly.

Bruce rested his forehead on his clenched fists. “That’s not helpful.”

“On the contrary, Bruce,” protested the femme literally-fatale. “It explains everything.”

“Be a friend and don’t let him push you away, alright?” suggested Barton.

It was conclusive: Loki had come by and made the Avengers forget about himself.

Tony wasn’t exactly happy about that, and even less happy about what it implied about the extent
of Loki’s powers that they still didn’t know about. Wrong as it was, though, the thing that made him reach for the bottle was that Loki had come by and not spoken with him.

Not given him another, much-desired hit of magic.

Tony hadn’t known the visits were meant to be a secret. Loki had never specified. Besides, he hadn’t actually told… although he could have been more careful about security.

“Ow,” Tony said, and then recreationally bumped his forehead against the top of his desk a few times. It ordinarily wouldn’t have hurt, but in this instance it aggravated his headache and sent pulses of pain through his brain.

“You are making me worry, sir,” JARVIS said, employing the imploring tone he only ever busted out when he was genuinely concerned and needed Tony to be serious and honest for just a moment, or he would go HAL 9000 on his creator’s ass.

“Hey, Jay…” Tony tried for a jaunty tone, but failed so hard he abandoned the idea as soon as the ellipsis was out of his mouth. “You remember my tiny little straight edge?”

However absurd it was to talk about ‘straight edge’ when he was a continuously relapsing alcoholic, Tony knew that JARVIS knew what he meant.

“I do, indeed. And am most grateful for it.”

“You wanna hear something funny?”

“I would enjoy that,” JARVIS riposted, “but I suspect that I will not see the humor in what you are about to tell me.”

“I am addicted,” Tony stated, definitively and without any superfluous qualifiers that would try to make it sound less bad.

“Yes, you are,” the AI agreed. “Is that the extent of your realization?”

“Cheeky.” Tony tapped one nail against the side of the half-empty bottle. The glass was shaped as a floral relief. Pretty, though he wasn’t sure what flowers had to do with whisky. “Not to alcohol.” He frowned. There was something not entirely right with that sentence. “Okay, probably alcohol, too. But that’s not bad.”

JARVIS’ silence was eloquent enough.

“Okay, it is bad, but, I can get alcohol whenever-”

JARVIS’ silence gained a distinctly disapproving quality. Tony wondered how he did it. Maybe some kind of transmission that a human could only receive at a subconscious level?

“-I need it, and I already know I can go off it if I need to. Mostly. Mostly not worth the stress of detox. Speaking of detox, we were reminiscing about my straight edge…”

Tony had once had sex to War Pigs. Afterwards she had rolled over and said: ‘It’s hilarious. The song is pretty much about you. I mean, the war pig.’

And Tony had burst into laughter, like that was the funniest thing he had ever heard.
He had had a press conference the next day. Pepper only knew what it was about. He had gotten there, let the make-up girl do her magic on his face, wore the suit about as well as he ever wore a suit, and when they finally thrust a mic in his face, he had said into it: ‘Don’t do drugs,’ and meant it wholeheartedly when he had thought back to last night.

War pig, Jesus. At least Merchant of Death had a style.

“Sir,” JARVIS said, still in the genuinely worried tone, “if you need me to find you a path to Asgard, I will do so.”

Tony’s vision blurred. He blinked the haze away and tried not to sniffle over the fact that his kid was brilliant. Brilliant. Tony was a genius, but Jay was something else.

“I’ll be fine,” he promised, with absolutely no basis for it. Sooner or later, the Prince of Lies was going to show up again – and if he wasn’t going to do so of his own will, Tony had ways of pulling him here. He would get his hit of magic.

x

Tony went for a ride, aimless but crazy with cabin fever.

About an hour outside of New York an idea came to him and he decided to go visit Aunt Peggy. He hadn’t seen her since before the Ontvættir happened, and she wasn’t going to recognize him anyway, so she wouldn’t ask any questions he wouldn’t want to answer.

“Oh, How’rd,” she said when he entered her room. It was a hospital room rather than the comfortable place he had been paying for; apparently her heart had taken a turn for the worse.

The nurse outside told Tony on no uncertain terms to prepare for the end.

“Hey, Pegs,” replied Tony, grinning.

She weakly rolled her eyes at him. “Cut that out. I was not…” She coughed. “…born yesterday.”

Tony let his face do whatever it felt like doing.

Aunt Peggy’s eyes filmed over with tears. “All gone to shit, huh…?” She paused to look at the machine she was wired to, with its blinking lights and muted beeping. “Won’t be hanging on much longer. When you… bringing your tyke?”

“Who cares about the snot?” Tony said in his best impression of his Father.

It probably sucked, since Peggy glared at him for it. “You, most of all. Would it kill you… to show it?”

Tony didn’t know what to say. He guessed Howard would have probably blustered his way through the conversation, maybe changed the topic or waved Tony off as uninteresting. It turned out that he didn’t need to strain his mind further, because Aunt Peggy nodded off.

“We will alert you if there are any changes, sir,” said the nurse as he passed her on the way out. She meant ‘when Ms Carter dies’. There wasn’t going to be a change for the better.

He walked the aisle of doom that was the corridor, inhabited by flocks of waiting patients gathered in front of their respective doctor’s doors. Old people, shaky people, smelly people, wrecks of people. Tony shuddered and strode on, pretending the horrifying part was only happening inside
his head, like a nightmare curtailed specifically to him.

He was so much smarter than all these people – surely he could find a way to think himself out of his downward spiral? Surely he wasn’t going to end up here? (or not here, because he was a billionaire, so all his shame and frailty would be hidden behind a wall of money guarded by private personnel, but that was semantics...)

x

Tony finished Barnes’ arm.

The installation process was completed and Barnes had gone through all the routines, proclaiming it ‘serviceable’ – there was some squabbling, which resulted in snickers and Tony getting shoulder-thumped by his own creation and assured that ‘it’s better than a flying car, Stark’.

Finally, Barnes twirled a screwdriver in his new hand the way Natasha sometimes played with throwing knives, and tilted his head to the side, dislodging a strand of longish hair. “So, Stark – why go through all the trouble to make sure Stevie didn’t find out I’m getting this today?” He flexed the arm.

Tony snorted. “He doesn’t want you around me. Especially not unsupervised. And I don’t want him here.”

“I don’t get it,” Barnes sighed. “You’re both crazy self-destructive twerps. By all rights you should be getting along like a house on fire.”

Tony snorted. Something on fire, definitely. With explosions. “This team only has the room for one crazy self-destructive twerp, and Cap wins by right of seniority.”

Barnes thumped his shoulder again, reinforcing the bruise. “They’re not going to kick you off the team.”

“I know they need me.” If for nothing else then to finance them.

“Damn right they do,” the Sergeant agreed. “Bunch of idealistic punks. And Natalya.”

“And you now,” Tony pointed out.

“You don’t want me to be the one to negotiate with politicians.” He raised the new prosthetic hand in both a lackadaisical salute and an illustration for his kind of negotiation. “I know how you get when people gush gratitude at you, Stark, so just... I owe you one.”

Tony dove back into science. There was a new set of ‘bites for Natasha, and he had a special surprise in the works – he’d call it a sniper rifle, if it weren’t to sniper rifles what Steve’s Capmobile was to motorcycles. Barnes was going to shit a brick when he got it.

“Sir,” JARVIS said later. Probably a lot later. “Captain Rogers is on the line.”

“What does he want?” Tony inquired, although he had a pretty good idea.

To gush. Rogers wanted to gush. As if Tony had made the sodding arm for him.

“To thank you, if I understood the gist of the avalanche correctly,” JARVIS confirmed.

“Decline, Jay. I don’t have time and energy to deal with that. He can send a greeting card if he has to do something. But not one of the singing ones. Just plain paper.”
“I shall provide detailed instructions,” Jay assured him.

Tony sat down heavily. He opened the fifth bottle of whisky of the day. Why not? It wasn’t doing anything to him, anyway.

Steve.

Mr Goshdarnit Rogers.

Cap, the fluffy dandelion of the superhero world. A head full of yellow hair and endless optimism. Tony felt like if he could spend a century staring at Steve, he would see the guy go from yellow to white, fluff up, and eventually Steve’s head would just burst into a cloud of tiny parachutes at one stronger gust of wind. Then he would sow himself all over the freckled hills of America, and in a year there would be a whole new generation of little yellow-haired optimistic Caps, and people would never ever get rid of them no matter how hard they tried.

Tony nodded to himself. “Better just not to let him get pollinated.”

“Sir?” JARVIS inquired, audibly worried.

Tony shrugged. “So many Steves. Everywhere.”

“Sir?!”

“Oi, no need for that tone of voice, butterfly. We don’t have to panic. Yet. Lets just not let Steve get pollinated in the first place, is what I suggest. Does it work like that? Biology is not my strongest suit, Jay, but I still think you need a boy flower and a girl flower to make little flowers.”

“Sir,” replied the worry-wart, “please sit down and wait for a moment. I have asked Dr Banner to come immediately.”

“Good idea, baby. Bruce knows about biology. It’s not an emergency, though… Or is it?” Tony suddenly realized that he might have underestimated the danger. “Do we need to cut Steve down now?”

“What?!”

Ah, there was the illustrious Dr Banner.

“Now,” Tony repeated, “before he goes all white and fluffy and suddenly there are Steves everywhere – the invasion of the Rogers! Think green, Brucie! We’ve only got this one planet, and it won’t survive that much concentrated nobility!”

Bruce seemed sort of greyish. That was unusual. Mostly he oscillated between tan and green.

“Tony,” said the biophysicist – that’s right, bio, Tony had a bio-question for him – in a voice that was yet more quiet and gentle than usual, like Bruce was even more afraid than usual that he would break the very fragile world surrounding him into teeny-tiny itsy-bitsy shards and get cut on them. He was the Hulk in the china shop. “Tony, what is happening?”

“I’m trying to figure out how to prevent Steve from taking over the world.”

“Is that a serious concern?” inquired Bruce, flashing a little of that adorkable sense of humor that he hid because he felt like he didn’t deserve it or something.

“His head will explode.”
“I’m sure,” Bruce agreed. “Anyone’s would. The world is too full of stupidity for any single person to manage it.”

“There’ll be Stevedelions everywhere.”

There was a low growly sound and then: “Jarvis, is he hallucinating?”

“Not that I could conclusively determine, doctor. Mr Stark has blood-alcohol level zero, he has eaten and had a reasonable amount of sleep, and has not been recently exposed to any substances toxic to him barring what he regularly uses in the workshop.”

“I drank alcohol,” Tony claimed, but then it occurred to him that maybe he hadn’t. Maybe someone had replaced all his booze with soap water. JARVIS did say that you could eat soap without it killing you.

“No, sir,” said the A.I. “You did not.”

And that, Tony mused wryly, was probably worse than if he had.

x

Tony had been wrong.

The green fairy didn’t miss him when he dried out. Not at all. It had turned up a couple of times in his dreams initially, but then it just disappeared and didn’t come back. If anyone asked him to estimate his measure of surprise, he’d go with, well, absolute nil. Yes.

He’d gone from bad to worse with abstinence – he’d been a worse dick than ever to Pepper, and he had very calmly (knowing how much worse that would be than histrionics) told Rhodey to leave his house and not bother coming back. He had backtalked Steve to the point that Bruce left the room via a hole in the floor, and Natasha had actually stabbed him.

It wasn’t life threatening, just a couple of stitches and couple of weeks of discomfort when sitting. It hadn’t helped.

So Pepper avoided him, Rhodey had come and promptly left, Tony refused to talk to Happy because he had devised about a dozen ways of breaking his heart with a few cutting words and came to the conclusion that it was better for all involved to break Happy’s heart with silence.

Falcon and the kids didn’t enter a room when Tony was in it.

Steve wasn’t speaking with Tony. Barton wasn’t speaking with Tony. Coulson wasn’t speaking with Tony directly, and if he needed to, he used Natasha as messenger. Natasha was speaking with Tony, but only to make him wish she wasn’t.

Barnes had tried, but gave up when Tony had pushed the rifle into his arms and told him that any attempt to talk to Tony would make Tony take it back. He actually probably got what Tony meant.

Even the fucking green fairy had given up on him.

Tony didn’t need anyone, and least of all the green fairy. Alcohol had betrayed him? And what? There were heaps of other fish in the sea.

x

“What did you take?” a distinctly pissed off voice hissed straight into Tony’s poor, abused ear.
Tony intended to swat it away, but his hand didn’t feel like moving. He magnanimously gave it five more minutes.

“Stark!” Another, equally or more pissed off voice demanded. This one sounded like a woman. A pretty woman, maybe. Pissed and pretty. Pretty when pissed. Pretty pissed.

“Interesting,” said the non-pretty pissed voice with equal amounts of irony and irritation. “He had actually taken a lethal dose.”

“So Jarvis told me,” said the pretty pissed voice.

“I had believed I had sufficiently discouraged him from continuing this behavior.”

The pretty voice tsked. “Right. Because he cannot out-stubborn you on a good day.”

There hadn’t been any good days since… Tony couldn’t remember, in fact. He couldn’t remember a whole lot lately, and that was the not-good but still mostly positive thing, like the lesser evil. Days sucked. “No good days,” he rasped, and that took it out of him, so he remained lying, eyes closed, and wondering if breathing wasn’t too much of a bother.

It probably was. He just couldn’t seem to fucking stop.

“Sadly,” said pretty-pissed voice, which now sounded a lot like Natasha’s, “that is a fair assessment. He has been getting worse since he’s sobered up.”

“What is it about you that makes you strive to destroy yourself?”

“’s all the self-hatred,” Tony explained.

Natasha laughed.

Someone, quite possibly the assassin in question, carded their fingers through Tony’s hair. That felt nice. It’s been a too damn long time since someone had done that to him. He had forgotten the nice thing.

He had forgotten all the nice things.

“I made an error of judgment,” said the other voice. “What I mistook for arrogance is in fact desperation. For that, I owe you an apology, Anthony Stark.”

“Whatever, Kylie,” Tony muttered. His head was full of cotton. And wool. It itched like wool, anyway.

“Kylie?” Natasha repeated, torn between disbelief and amusement, now that she was apparently placated that Tony wasn’t dying. Anymore.

Funny thing, that. He had expected more machines. Beeping. A hospital, too.

“It has something to do with a mythological creature contained within absinth, I believe,” explained the green fairy. Yeah, the green fairy. That was the non-pretty pissed voice.
Tony woke up feeling good.

*So* good.

He had forgotten how good it was possible to feel, and he wasn’t even having sex at the moment. From there it only took him a very short time to realize that he was feeling good because he had been pumped up to eyeballs with magic, and then the memory of the conversation for which he had only been half-conscious alighted on his mind.

“Jarvis?” he inquired.

“Imagine, sir, that I were to voluntarily turn myself off.”

Tony blanched. The good feeling was gone. In fact, he thought that he would throw up-

“*Please,* do not do this to me ever again,” JARVIS implored.

Tony carefully sat up. Everything worked. Nothing really hurt, not even the seam of the arc reactor, which hurt pretty much constantly. His tear ducts were staging a mutiny and starting a production that he hadn’t approved.

“Jay, we both know I’m going to die someday.” Someday soon. “Was Natasha really here?” He knew about Loki, considering the amount of magic coursing through him, but the memory of their Russian spy cuddling him seemed a little improbable.

“I am asking you to not hasten it up, *Tony!*”

This was serious. JARVIS had only ever busted out the first name a couple of times in his life. Tony wasn’t sure if he would be able to keep his promise, but he meant it as seriously as he could when he said: “I’ll do my best.”

JARVIS didn’t respond for a prolonged moment. Then he lit up the emergency lights along the bottoms of the walls leading away from Tony’s bedroom (he had had the presence of mind to get high in private) to wherever JARVIS wanted him to go. At this point Tony was willing to comply out of repentance.

“Agent Romanov was indeed present,” confirmed the A.I. once Tony had set out.

“I thought Loki made them all forget.”

“He did not make *me* forget,” JARVIS said with a hint of smugness. “I cannot hazard an estimate whether he did not know to, did not know how to, or considered me trustworthy enough to remain in the know. You may wish to take notice of the fact that you remember everything as well.”

For a given value of everything, Tony quietly amended, and descended the darkened emergency staircase to the workshop level, guided by blue lights at shin-height.

“Agent Romanov has a remarkably well-trained memory,” JARVIS explained, “and Mr Lie-Smith did not make any aggressive adjustments. She required but a nudge to recover her recollections.”

With a click and a hiss the door in front of Tony opened and let him into his own workshop.
Darkened as it was, he barely recognized it. The space was shrouded in darkness, but there was still a sense of enormity to it. LED light shone along the walls and floor, and JARVIS led Tony directly to the far corner, where Tony kept his magic-related inventions.

Tony approached the generator and drew a line with his finger along the curve of its top. “Sing, my angel!”

The generator hummed. After the start-up sequence was completed, it emitted a faint glow that gradually formed a half-sphere. The whole process was far too slow, but if it worked, it was a reasonable starting point.

“Have you lost what little was left of your sanity, Stark?”

Tony didn’t flinch much. He should have expected that the green fairy would have hung around to take his pound of flesh. He had arguably saved Tony’s life again.

On the other hand, Tony maintained that he wouldn’t have warranted saving if Loki hadn’t neutralized all his booze.

“I believe sir was referencing the Phantom of the Opera,” said JARVIS, completely unconcerned about the intruder.

“I should have known,” Loki commented. “One day you may realize that quoting those who were madder than you does not make you seem less mad in comparison.”

Look who was talking.

Tony touched the cerulean light. It shocked him, gently, like a puppy giving a playful bite. “Not really a burning ambition of mine, Morning Star. Sanity is grossly overrated.”

The shield held. Tony had officially constructed a defence against magic. Testing pending, of course, but he was feeling confident. The thing should stop not only projectiles, but also direct hits with offensive magic. With a year of work he might be able to magic-proof the entire Tower.

“But the semblance of sanity is priceless,” Loki cautioned him, for an instance stretching his mouth in his signature insane grin, before he let it fade to a more civil facial expression.

Right, sanity, faking it, Tony was way ahead of Loki on this one. He was more interested in advancing past the primer. “Hey, maestro, can you check if the shield actually works against offensive magic?”

With an expression Tony would have described as mildly intrigued, Loki put his cupped hands together. When he pulled them apart, a ball of acidic green light jumped out of between them and crashed into the top of the half-sphere of the shield.

A turquoise ripple moved all the way from the crash site, down the shield’s slope, to the ground, where it ate through the flooring and dissipated just before it dissolved the wiring Tony had installed.

He glanced up, uncertain if that was a success or a resounding failure.

“I am being lenient,” Loki assured him, looking at the naked cables he had kept intact solely to make Tony’s life easier, “since for your first attempt, this device does not disappoint me.” “It would be provident if you learnt to stop relying on devices. Your body already contains all that you might need.”
Tony hadn’t even found that bridge yet; he wasn’t about to start making promises regarding crossing it.

Loki examined the humming half-sphere more closely. He touched it, listened to its frequency change ever so slightly in response. He pushed, and it gave under the pressure from his fingers, but when he backed off it regained its original shape.

His Liarship nodded, pleased. Then he turned from the shield to Tony, and zeroed in on the arc reactor.

“What blue?” he inquired.

“Cherenkov radiation,” Tony explained, and turned the generator off. Remotely, since he couldn’t stick his hand through it. “Jay, display the Wikipedia article for our extraterrestrial magical visitor.”

“Habit, then?” Loki paraphrased, parsing the human ideas of popularized hackjob science a la freely editable encyclopedia. “Or is the color your actual preference?”

“I like it. It’s pretty.” Tony hadn’t actually ever thought about the color scheme much. In the beginning it was what it was – later on he went with the truism ‘why mess with success’. At this point anything else would feel like he was either renouncing something his own creation or trying too hard to one-up himself. It would have been like the Iron Patriot – painting over the original in the effort to pretend that it was somehow suddenly cooler. “And mine.”

Loki nodded.

He didn’t say anything, but Tony had noticed that whenever Loki used magic openly, it tended to manifest as poisonous green. Made sense that it would be a thing for mages.

Huh, look at him. Just a baby, and already with a killer sense of style.

“Cherenkov radiation,” Loki repeated pensively. “Your cult of the individual is so apparent in your convention of naming discoveries after discoverers…”

“I guess,” Tony admitted. He hadn’t ever lost any time thinking about naming conventions. Things existed, and were named if they needed to be used as concepts. Language was important only ever as a communications medium. ‘Soft sciences’ were for people who couldn’t manage real, proper science.

He didn’t see how any of that was relevant to a creature that allegedly understood all languages – the mere idea of Allspeak freaked Tony out.

“I do not understand,” Loki admitted. “Why are there no discoveries named after you?”

Oh.

Tony gulped.

“By all indications, you should be a modern day idol. You have your worshippers and their enemies ready to wage holy war on you. You have temples dedicated to you. There are prayers and invocations of your name. Why, Anthony Stark, do you not wish to acknowledge the mark you have made on this world?”

That was one of the tough ones.
“I’m not getting into this sober.”

x

“…he was the first Stark. I’ve done my fucking best to eclipse him, but there are still people who think of Howard when they hear the name ‘Stark’—” Chief of them being Captain sodding America. “—and that’s recently. Historically all the claim I had on my own brand was hereditary.”

Loki snorted into his own glass, pretending to be far more relaxed than he actually was. Apparently the adage about the tortured ones being the best torturers held a grain of truth – he certainly knew what he was doing when he neutralized all alcohol in Tony’s vicinity.

“That shall not ever change.”

Tony eyeballed him. “It already has. Right now there are still those who knew my Father personally, but in a couple of decades I will be the only Stark people will know of. I will be the one they remember. And he can… rot.”

The earnestness of the statement startled him. Usually he would have been more diplomatic about it.

He didn’t even hate Howard, in hindsight. Howard hadn’t actually been malicious. Just inept, and obliviously cruel in his disregard, and Tony knew he was too damn much like him to ever make any attempts at rearing progeny. He would have fucked it up at least as much as his Father did.

Concisely put, Tony wanted the memory of Howard erased, and he had done a lot to make it happen on a global scale.

“Yet one more aspect in which the shortness of your lifespan is a blessing.”

Tony, uncomfortably hyperaware of his own mortality, disagreed. The awareness stressed him out so much he had actually gone off his rocker properly when he had to deal with it sober.

“Are your people really that different from mine?” Tony’s mouth asked without bothering to ask permission from his brain. Then he decided that if he was getting smitten, he might as well deserve it. “You go around calling yourself gods, but aside from awing some Vikings thousand years ago with ridiculously advanced tech, you’re not that different. Thor’s medieval and aloof at a glance, but behind closed doors he’s a complete hoot and… he’s a buddy.”

Loki snorted.

“What?” Tony demanded. “You should see him shaking down to Chumbawamba. I’ve got a video somewhere. Jay—”

“Midgardians resemble Aesir in their appearance,” Loki cut in, oddly uninterested in seeing a fairly embarrassing recording of his not-brother-anymore. Something in his face shifted, and suddenly he looked mildly evil again. “So much so that when the Dark Elves wanted to give offence to a diplomatic envoy from the Allfather, they prepared a feast where human was the main course.”

Tony had played that game before. He knew how diplomatic events went. “Let me guess. You were part of that envoy.”

“Yes.”

Those shindigs were basically a game of ‘how much shit can we foist onto these foreign guys until
their resolve breaks’. Starting with forcing the hicks to eat the most ethnic food you could reasonably justify.

Tony himself had a mostly fond childhood memory of honey-crusted grasshoppers. They were a lot less palatable coming up the wrong way, and let’s just say you couldn’t actually claim that about every meal you ate.

Case in point.

To his best knowledge, he had never eaten human. After some of those dinners, though, he wouldn’t have been too surprised to be proven wrong on this assumption.

“I’m almost scared to ask…” Tone hesitated, and then realised he wasn’t. It might have been the alcohol, or it might have been a lot of personal experience. “No, that’s a lie. I’m definitely not scared to ask. How was it?”

Loki shrugged, stretching out his mile-long legs. “I gave my compliments to the chef, despite the fact that I found the meat overcooked. It was, after all, a diplomatic affair.” He met Tony’s eye and exchanged a wholly unexpected confidence through it. “Do you regret asking yet?”

“I used to think I wasn’t a morbid person.” Tony poured himself another drink. “Ice Giants eat raw meat, don’t they.”

“Frost Giants. And yes.”

“I’m suddenly recalling the poultry simile.”

This basically meant that Dr Foster was a chick, and while that was funny, in was also really… uh… not.

Sometimes it was a good thing to have a vivid imagination. One couldn’t truly be a futurist without it, not to speak about inventing a shitload of revolutionary technology. On the other hand, some phrases other people took as given, skipping over literal interpretations, just translated into pictures you had never wanted inside your head.

And sometimes your questionably amicable acquaintance reminisced about eating unpleasantly non-raw human, and you could just imagine them daintily cutting off bite-sized pieces of your academic colleague.

“My self-professed brother already proved very thoroughly that fucking a human is not only viable, but also acceptably satisfying,” Loki mentioned to prove that he knew exactly what Tony was thinking about.

So, now Tony knew why Jarvis (the other Jarvis, although, come to think of it, occasionally also his JARVIS) always told him not to play with his food.

“For an Aesir,” Tony pointed out. Drunk he might have been, but unaware he was not. “And let’s face it, pumpkin – you’re something else.”

Loki sank lower and narrowed his eyes to match his pose, like one of those dolls that looked like it was sleeping if you placed it horizontally (Tony wouldn’t have admitted to how he knew about those things on pain of evisceration – unless there was an opportunity to make Steve blush in it). He seemed to have a weakness for comfortable furniture; possibly Asgardian carpenters thought that comfort was for pussies, and consequently hewed the beds out of stone. It would have explained a lot.
“I am an extraordinarily talented shape-shifter,” Loki professed, pretending to be far tipsier then he could have been after a couple of tumblers of scotch. “You might even say that I am whatever I wish to be at any given time.”

“It’s your long-standing desire to be an unmitigated douchebag with frequent bad-hair days?”

Loki didn’t smite him. He looked like he honestly could not be bothered to. “My hair is merely… temperamental. Prone to chaos.”

“Like the rest of you.” Tony drunkenly grinned. “How cute.”

“Stark?” Loki said mildly.

“Threat of death by dismemberment heard loud and clear.” Tony idly lapped at the droplets of booze around the rim of his glass. Loki hadn’t owed him for a while. Why hadn’t he ripped Tony apart in a fit of rage yet? Tony seemed eminently rippable. Even most of his so-designated teammates sometimes had trouble reigning in the impulse… “My teammates don’t like you.”

“Understandable.”

“You tried to kill most of us. And brainwashed Clint.” Tony felt like he had the distinct moral high-ground in this situation. It was novel.

It was maybe negated by having this conversation with the villain in question in the first place.

“I ensured that the most of you survived.”

“Did you mean to do that?” Frankly, Tony couldn’t imagine. “Or is that another lie that works just well enough in hindsight?”

Loki opened his palms, holding the tumbler loosely suspended between two fingers. “I do not know.”

You do not know, Tony’s mind repeated incredulously. “Buddy, you’re crazier than we thought.”

Crazy. Crazy in the way things looked when you didn’t have sufficient intelligence about their background. At a glance as self-defeating as the usual crazy, but if it truly was, Loki wouldn’t have been sitting on Tony’s couch and using Tony’s best scotch in vain (or just to pretend to be affected by it, which he could have done just as well with mouth-wash).

Loki shrugged. “Often I simply play a role written in the script I am given. The ending may be subject to rewriting at any time.”

“Is this determinism?” Tony inquired. He had read all the philosophy he absolutely had to to graduate, and not a line more. Unless you were counting Star Trek. Which he was. Despite Star Trek, he was still lost in the terminology. But, determinism. Spock would have turned in his grave, if he wasn’t an imaginary character. “From the God of Chaos? Excuse me, but I’m not buying that shit. If you try to tell me you have no free will-”

“You misunderstand, Stark,” Loki cut in, still not quite homicidal.

Tony made a mental note to feed that guy. Otherwise he might go for raw human if he got hungry and cranky and Tony didn’t cease to be his usual aggravating self – which he didn’t foresee happening anytime soon.
“I have freedom to make my own choices,” assured him the alleged god. Good to know. Or, you know, maybe not good. Ugh, philosophy. “But I rarely know my mind well enough to know what I want. Oftentimes I remain in the dark to my own desires until it is too late to obtain them.”


“To never have met Thanos comes to mind.”

Tony was almost startled into laughing. He managed to get past the unexpected sarcasm with just a choked-off cough. Embarrassing, but it didn’t get him turned into a frog, and for that he was glad. He didn’t think frog legs were practical for programming. Also, French cuisine suddenly sounded frightening.

“The way we got here is fantastical,” Tony agreed. “I grew up on stories about the late, great Captain America, and I never expected that superheroes would become an actually category of human being. Much less that I would qualify.” He didn’t think he did, but it turned out that he wasn’t the arbiter on these things. “It just sounds like you’ve got another thing in common with us puny humans.”

Loki flinched at the word ‘puny’. It probably shouldn’t have been satisfying…

It was.

Loki shouldn’t have Imperio’d Barton if he wanted to be eligible for sympathy regarding the incident of Hulk smashing the stuffing out of him. It was funny in hindsight, although at the time they all mostly just hated Loki enough that they weren’t able to see the hilarity of it – a Norse deity having his ass handed to him by Bruce’s semi-failed experiment.

And this was the world Tony lived in.

“You know what I remember?” asked the scotch in his veins. “I remember a time when there were hard limits—”

Loki burst into laughter.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, I remember a time when I thought there were hard limits. It made not going crazy kind of a lot easier.”

“You still seemed to have failed at it.”

That wasn’t entirely fair. Maybe Tony hadn’t acted like he was entirely with it, but he had been young and brilliant and rich; the world had been his mollusk, and he hadn’t ever seen a reason to deny himself its most obvious charms – the best tech, the most expensive booze (and occasionally more) and the prettiest women (and occasionally more). Living inside that hurricane of money, adrenaline, backstabbing and absolutely no sense of accountability whatsoever removed him from anything remotely sane on this planet.

No wonder he had been a little cuckoo even before Stane paid the terrorists to make red-leaking sieves out of his convoy and teach Tony the ins and outs of waterboarding in a cave. Honestly, it was probably the juxtaposition that finally did it. Tony broke in a way that Hemingway would have liked.

“You know me,” he quipped, gesturing with the glass – and when did it get empty? “I push at limits. Can’t seem to stop.”
“It is what I find so appreciable about you.” For a moment Loki’s facial expression fit perfectly into how Tony remembered Edwin Jarvis, exasperated and yet helplessly charmed, no matter how hard he tried to hide it (it made Tony feel all of seven years old). “You are quite lucky. Should anyone else try my patience so, I would have dealt with them rather summarily.”

Oh. So that was it. Not that Loki had suddenly become tolerant – just that Tony’s cool factor outweighed his obnoxiousness factor. It sometimes started like this when he met people. It never lasted.

“I’m not lucky yet. But I’d like to get lucky.”

…case in point.

Loki glanced at Tony, took in his exaggerated (but by no means fake) leer, and burst into laughter again. If Tony were a little less sober, he might have categorized the look in the jerk’s eyes as fond.

He should have figured that coming out of this idyllic isolation where he felt good and had fun and didn’t hurt would be jarring. The familiar juxtaposition reared its head as soon as he stepped out into the communal area.

It wasn’t quite as bad an ambush as it could have been – and as he expected, given that he had, more or less, committed suicide – and maybe that was in deference to his ‘fragile emotional state’.

“I’m cured,” he announced to the room at large, and to Natasha and Bruce in particular. His widely spread arms hung in midair for a moment, and when the only response he received turned out to be a skeptical look from Bruce and a cold glare from Natasha, he let them down.

Natasha still seemed kind of pissed. And a pissed Black Widow was a terrifying sight.

“Izlechenny iz gluposti?”

“I feel like that was not nice,” Tony mused idly. In the absence of the HUD JARVIS could have projected the translation somewhere else, but it seemed that Tony and JARVIS weren’t okay yet either.

What the combined force of most of the Avengers hadn’t managed, a single thought of JARVIS accomplished easily: Tony felt a stab of guilt in his chest.

Bruce rubbed the back of his head. Come to think of it, he looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Hadn’t showered or changed either. Even Tony looked more presentable, and Tony had spent yesterday afternoon drinking with an arguably-villainous arguably-deity, the night sleeping like a baby and the morning up until now marvelling at the fact that getting high on magic precluded hangovers.

“Nice like overdosing?” muttered Barton. “Still not sure if you’re just a fucking moron, Stark, or if you’re a fucking moron and an asshole that did that on purpose.”

Emotional manipulation? “That’s rich coming from you, Mr You-Shouldn’t-Have-Pulled-The-Punch-Steve.”

Barton had the temerity to look taken aback for an instance. Then he grimaced. “Really, Stark? Can dish it out but can’t take it?”
Tony might have accepted that as an argument, were it not for the fact that he took extreme, uncharacteristic care to never, ever antagonize Barton about his Loki-related issues. Aside from having Loki follow him home like a stray cat, but that hadn’t been under his control.

Also, Barton didn’t remember it. At the moment.

Guessing from the look on Natasha’s face, that was a state of affairs that wouldn’t last for very long.

“That is beside the point,” said Steve, because suddenly it looked like Tony might have gained the upper hand in an argument, and they couldn’t have that. It was time for an intervention from above.

“Tony, we have been concerned for some time-”

“And showed that by avoiding me,” Tony pointed out. Not that he blamed them; he could be – and was occasionally – a professional antagonist, so it took… he actually didn’t know what it took to deal with him. There hadn’t been anyone who managed so far.

“Good thing Coulson isn’t here,” Natasha muttered. “He would put us in SERE for that.”

Steve and Barton shuddered.

Bruce blinked, trying to work out the acronym.

“Did you re-inhume him?” Tony inquired idly. “I hear a headshot does it for zombies. Barring that, fire would probably work. Oh, JARVIS, check old discarded files; I designed a travel-sized flamethrower back in high school, Natasha would probably like that-”

“Coulson’s recruiting,” Barton jumped in like he hated flamethrowers, the pyrophobic. “Since it looks like the team’s going to have a vacancy.”

What team? Tony wondered. What fucking team? These guys gathered here to face him, who couldn’t even agree on their approach? Half of whom didn’t really want Tony around and only felt obligation, because he had saved the world a couple of times, and most of their lives as some point, and they didn’t exactly want him to die.

Then there was Natasha, who knew him better than he was comfortable with, and understood him just enough to be willing to cut him some slack. Not a lot of it, though.

He was surprised this last extempore hadn’t broken that camel’s back.

And Bruce… oh, well, Bruce didn’t fit into a category yet, but he hadn’t exactly said much either. He just looked like the possibility that Tony might die had seriously messed him up, and Tony plain didn’t want to think about what that might mean. Because that way lay self-reproach and compunctions, and he had too much of those already.

“You do look better.”

Oh, fuck, Bruce.

Bruce, who had calmly informed them that when he had gotten low, he had eaten a gun. Tony could just imagine the other things he had tried – the whole spectrum of self-inflicted death, all defeated by a green alter ego. Heh, Bruce had his own green fairy, only his was bigger and more growly. Not by much, though.

“My ailment was cured. Or, maybe a better word would be…” Why, why, why did he forget how
to lie when Bruce looked at him like that? Even Natasha couldn’t scare him into truthfulness. This sucked so much. “…treated.”

Barton snorted.

“Does that mean this will happen again?” Steve asked tightly.

“Chances are,” Tony admitted. He hadn’t stopped being addicted to magic just because he got his hit.

“He did something to you,” said Natasha. This was probably her way of breaking it to the other three gently.

“Saved my life?” Tony suggested. “Repeatedly?”

“You were different when you came back the first time, but I know that imprisonment can change a person. And you weren’t getting better, but you weren’t exactly trying.” Her venomous green eyes bore into Tony. “Up until he came back and saved your life, I thought you were just refusing to deal with your trauma like an adult person.”

Cruel, but not entirely incorrect, Tony had to admit. And, also, his alleged teammates weren’t stupid. They had figured out whom Natasha was not-so-obliquely referencing, and all effort to wipe their memories went down the drain. In one fell swoop.

“Tony…” Steve finally unglued himself from the window and came up to Tony, putting a comradely hand on his shoulder. “…is this Loki?” Earnest blue gazes should be banned.

“Yeah… why?” Oh, wow, Tony even managed to make that sound nonchalant.

“Loki, Tony,” Steve insisted, hand and eyes tightening. “You remember Loki, the guy who hurt Clint and brought a hostile alien army through a portal?”

‘Hurt’. Tony liked that euphemism. It missed just about everything important about the situation. In fact, a day later Steve had ‘hurt’ Tony, and everyone was pretending like that had never happened. Wow, double standards.

“He also helped me. And didn’t kill me. I think he likes me.”

He realized he had been far too glib for Steve to entertain the thought that Tony had meant it. Which he had. With more than a fair share of sarcasm, but at the same time, he wasn’t dead yet, and he had given Loki more than enough opportunities.

“Is this a joke?” asked Barton. “Usually you’re funnier than this. Are you drunk?”

It was distinctly possible. Tony had no idea. In the absence of the hangover, he couldn’t be sure. “Jarvis, when did I last eat and what was it?”

“How do you not know these things?!” Steve cried, throwing up his hands.

At least he stopped putting pressure on Tony’s poor, abused shoulder, and wasn’t making the future bruise any worse.

“I always make routines and subroutines for that shit,” Tony started to babble in self-defence. “Macros. Keep them running as autonomously as possible so I don’t have to waste processing power on them – food, hygiene, taxes, anniversaries, sometimes debriefings…”
“Who doesn’t?” Bruce asked rhetorically. “Though maybe you could try and focus in the debriefings.”

“Jarvis pays attention. Don’t you, honeyboo?”

“Always,” agreed the voice from above, laconic due to unresolved conflict but faithful as ever.

“Tony, if you didn’t want to be an Avenger-”

“I wanted to save the world and get the girl,” Tony retorted. “The girl’s in the wind-” In a hotel room somewhere, which she shared with her bodyguard, and they were both nominally Tony’s friends, so he was obligated to be happy for them – heh, Happy. “-and the world keeps turning as long as you keep the guard, so I guess I don’t see the point of this exercise.”

He didn’t actually resent Steve, but it had been a near miss, and only because he had people like Vanko and Hammer to resent, and after Tony used up Howard’s standing quota there just wasn’t any resentment left over in him.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out for you with Miss Potts,” Steve said, sounding like he genuinely was, never mind that Pepper was far too good for Tony. “I could tell you were hurting even before you… you left.” Nice save. Not. “-but I guess I never figured out how to help. You’ve always been so hard to read, Tony, and I’ve tried, but I can’t make heads or tails of you.”

Tony might have gaped. Incredulously. So, this was what red, white and blue bullshit smelled like.

Or, wait, no, that was the bonds-selling tour. This was just regular Steve-Rogers bullshit, established 1920 in Brooklyn.

“Wait,” Barton spoke up from the armchair, where he was held by Natasha, who either remembered that they had been through this before or was just that consistent in her reactions, “are we just glossing over the fact that Stark here brought Loki to this building.”

‘Brought him’. Tony loved that. As if he could have affected Loki’s comings and goings in any way.

“No,” Steve assured him, “we’ll get to that in a while.”

“He saved Tony’s life,” Natasha said, with only a hint of a mocking tone. “Repeatedly.”

“And I’m… not discounting that,” replied Captain Fair, who could be a paragon of diplomacy when he judged that the situation called for it, “but that doesn’t absolve his previous crimes, and it definitely doesn’t get Tony out of trouble. You should have told us-”

“You should have blasted his adopted ass to kingdom come-”

“Clint-”

“Guys-”

“Alright, sorry, but I’ve got to leave.” Bruce stood rapidly, and set forth as if there was a Hulk chasing him. Metaphorically, that was probably the case. Before he left, he said only: “Tony, please don’t die.”

Aside from JARVIS’ impassioned pleas, it was the single most touching thing Tony had heard in regards to his lack of survival instinct. And Rhodey had tried, a lot, over a lot of years.
“Bruce took it a little hard,” Steve tried to bumblingly explain – as if Tony needed an explanation.

“There’s always one odd one,” Tony replied, and it was funny to watch as Steve started to nod reflexively, then realized what he had just heard, and tried to figure out how to react to it. He was far too slow for the reaction to be taken as genuine, and too much of his thought process could be seen on his face.

“Get over yourself,” muttered Natasha, not entirely unsympathetically.

“And the next time you see that mind-raping bastard, blast his ass – or one of us two is out of here.” Barton’s expression was dark and serious, and Tony didn’t mind that he meant the threat.

It was still a milder reaction than the first time they had had this argument, and Tony wasn’t entirely sure what had made the difference. He honestly doubted that Loki would have earned any kind of goodwill from the Amazing Hawkeye for keeping Tony from death’s welcoming grasp – the opposite was more likely.

Tony nodded. “Sure. Whatever you say, Alison Argent.” Huh, that was almost fitting, with the brain-wash and the attacking of people who were supposed to be his friends. “We’ve all got stuff to do, so let’s break this up and go do it.”

“Wait, where are you- Tony, stop! Tony, we haven’t figured out how-”

Well, at least Steve hadn’t chased him down and tackled him. That would have been uncomfortable. And unprofessional. And possibly effective.

“JARVIS.”

“Sir, please do not do anything ill-advised.”

Tony reconsidered his idea, and decided that his A.I. was right. “Let’s do it your way. I’ll take the suitcase suit with me. But for the rest I’m activating Protocol: Sleepover.”

He could hear JARVIS’ implied sigh in the following silence. “Very well, sir.”

“I’m not giving up, Jay. I just need to leave for a bit. Taking a bit of a sabbatical. Getting out of dodge before piranha Pep chews me up and spits me out. Finding myself.”

“Where will you go, sir?”

Tony agreed that this was a very good question, and thus spent several seconds contemplating the answer. “India. Jungle. Worked for Bruce.”

There was another disapproving silence.

After a while JARVIS spoke again, very softly: “Just… remember your promise.”

Tony put a hand over his arc reactor, mostly blocking out the Cherenkov-blue light, and sincerely said: “Cross my heart.”

He might or might not have crossed his fingers too, though.
The snake gazed at Tony for a while.

Then it slithered away.

It was a disappointing experience.

He sighed. “Any news, Jay?” he asked into the handsfree. The suitcase suit walked a few steps behind him like a faithful shadow; he could have done without that experience, but the alternative was lugging around the suitcase himself (or getting raked over hot coals by JARVIS), and he liked his arms their current length.

“Protocol: Sleepover has been engaged, sir. All armors are at the Malibu location, disengaged and shielded from detection, as per your order.”

“All quiet on the Eastern Front,” Tony replied, listening to the distant hum of civilization.

Admittedly, he hadn’t progressed to full-on hermit within the past thirty-six hours, but as of yet he failed to see the appeal of his surroundings. Bruce kept referencing his sojourns with nostalgia that made Tony covet a similar adventure, but maybe part of that retroactive contentedness was the Hulk’s enjoyment of surroundings that weren’t as fragile as humans and buildings.

Tony wasn’t even going to pretend that he had thought this one through. It was more like his usual rapid-fire association game, and sometimes the conclusions ended up in places that they shouldn’t have. For example, here.

He was a little surprised that he was still intact, despite the general… jungleness of this environment.

“Did something happen?” he inquired.

“If we are continuing in the vein you have opened, sir, and referencing German World War Two authors-”

“No, no, don’t try and surpass me in obnoxiousness, honeycircuits. We both know you could if you put your mind to it. Let’s not. We’ve only got the one planet-”

“Patently untrue,” cut in another voice.

Tony damn-near pirouetted in the undergrowth, and seeing as he had a machete in his hands, also damn-near killed himself. He wasn’t trained for contact weapons, okay? He was more of a missile kind of guy.

“I’m guessing Bruce had a very different jungle-related experience,” he remarked.

Loki scowled at him. “Into which dark dungeon of consciousness have you thought yourself now, Stark?”

Tony blinked.

“We may have gone from Remarque to Heller to Kafka,” opined JARVIS.
“I visited your Tower-”

“The Avengers’ tower,” Tony muttered, only a little bit bitter.

“-and your sentinel has informed me that you were preoccupied attempting to become Mowgli.”

Tony pouted, but it was probably lost on any observer, since the predominant impression would have been his interpretative routine of a man trying to ward off mosquitoes. Or whatever those insects were. They had a creepy, vampiric feel to them. He could have sworn they were watching him while he slept.

“You could have at least said Tarzan, Jay. He was an aristocrat. Lord Greystock. And a king.”

“Of the apes,” JARVIS clarified.

“A tiny step for the evolution.” Tony dismissed the distinction with a paraphrase of a scientific progress quote, because his mind was elsewhere. He used to think that he liked green. When it was everywhere around, it unnerved him.

“Kingship is not entirely what it is lauded to be,” Loki pointed out, sidestepping a swinging creeper. “Although you do possess the requisite vainglory. To rule apes.”

“Eh, kingship. Sounds boring. And annoying.”

“You have rather passed the less enjoyable facets of ruling onto your personal assistant.”

“CEO,” Tony corrected.

“Vizier.”

Tony shuddered. “Viziers are empirically all evil. And Pepper…” He paused. “Alright, I see your point.” At least one of the points. Come to think of it, what was the main point? “Didn’t expect to see you so soon. What brought you-” or, more likely, your astral projection, “all the way to the civilization frontier?”

“It is base sentimentality, I assure you.” Loki sighed. “There are so very few enjoyable things in my life.”

Tony nodded. He knew exactly what that was like, although, granted, he wasn’t as desperate as to stalk a chicken to amuse himself. “Right now, my biggest problem is just how much I need sex. I’m sure I could find a friendly goat around here somewhere, but, to be honest, the idea kinda doesn’t hold much appeal.”

Loki extended his arm and touched Tony’s temple with the tip of his finger.

It carried a jolt of magic that sent shivers down Tony’s spine.

“…or you could do more of that.”

The self-proclaimed agent of chaos stared with a hit of incredulity around his eyes. “You have the strangest reactions, Stark. I am not entirely unfamiliar with being coveted, whether the object be my body or my magic, but never has the demand of my attention transpired in quite such an artless fashion.”

Artless. Tony wouldn’t know artful if it bit him on the bank account. That was Pepper’s domain, and he had always gladly let her have her way with his finances. His favorite art was engineering,
and if he absolutely had to have something hanging on the wall, he liked stylized superhero posters. Like all the cool, nerdy kids.

None of that Pollockish ‘in fact I hired two year olds to paint this’ garbage. And if he wanted to stare at Mona Lisa smiles, he would be spending more time around Captain Stoic America Pre-Barnes. With Barnes included, Rogers turned into an impressionist sunflower instead, all bright yellow and turned to his sun.

*Ooh, that felt good.* Never mind that it sent his thoughts spinning around like Catherine wheels on crack, Tony relished the buzz of magic (whatever the energy actually was, in light of his recent knowledge level-up) too much to antagonize his dealer into leaving.

“I don’t even care you’re insulting me, Tinker Bell. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I am healing you, Stark,” Loki explained.

That made no sense. Tony was about as intact as a human being could be with a liver that had been brutally abused for forty years and a chunk of metal in his chest. “Why?”

Loki fell silent, although the flow of magic from him to Tony remained steady. After a while of uninterrupted background jungle noise he heaved a very heavy sigh and said, sardonically: “Beats me.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. Sure, the incongruous use of colloquial Midgardianism was cute, and in contrast with Loki’s usual regality it made Tony want to snicker, but the magic hadn’t quite turned his brain off yet, so he didn’t buy the cute bullshit.

“C’mon, Morning Star. There are easier ways to get into my pants.”

Loki huffed. The flow of magic wavered and slowly tapered off. Tony felt recharged, and overcharged, and ready to charge forth, although seeing as ‘forth’ was nothing but the moist wilderness filled with insect and other venomous critters he didn’t actually move. He stayed here with the alien prince who was looking at him with condescending amusement. The look was much too parental – parental enough to kill off the up-to-now attractive notion of sex with Loki.

Well, not entirely, maybe, because there was sexy and then there was gorgeous, brilliant, aristocratic extraterrestrial mage, but right now Tony realized he was being held upright only by Loki’s arm around his torso.

Funny, how all this magical healing made Tony’s knees turn to jelly without him noticing.

“Are you adopting me?” he guessed again.

Loki said nothing; he just tilted his head to the side, and Tony took that as indication that the idea perhaps had some merit. The guess wasn’t spot on, but he was definitely getting warmer.

“Because-” Tony started speaking and then nearly choked on his tongue as a swirl of ‘magic’ burst out every which way around them. For a moment they stood in the eye of a tornado of icy power that exploded outwards and terraformed their immediate surroundings – like an entire ice age compressed into an insanely fraught half-minute.

Tony became aware that he was gaping as Loki pretty much sat him down onto a newly created bench, let him lean back against something too soft to be wood, and conjured (or im-ported) a tray with drinks and finger food.
Tony leaned his head back. There was still canopy above them, and through the leaves he could see the bright blue sky. A startled flock of birds flew across it. Somewhere off, he imagined, all sorts of animals were stampeding away in fright, but here reigned sudden silence.

The air smelled like the house above the cliff where Loki had kept him.

Tony accepted a glass with the sparkling juice Loki preferred and sipped on it. Once his throat didn’t feel so parched, he tried to speak again. “Because the two times someone adopted me, they got killed.”

And he wasn’t even counting Obadiah in that, even though that snake also fit the description. Let’s say that Tony had posthumously disowned himself there.

There was a hand in his hair.

Maybe he should protest being treated like a child.

“Speak to me of the fathers of your heart, Stark,” ordered Loki.

“Is that what we call them now?” Tony blinked slowly. There was a room around him that reminded him of the ice hotel somewhere around the polar circle, but here there was a tableau of tropical wilderness visible through it.

It wasn’t like anything he had ever seen before. It resembled nothing on Earth.

“I have been learning many things from the cultures of Midgard. The concept of families of choice pleases me greatly.”

It would. Loki, who had been dicked around by the lies regarding his ancestry and a less than half-hearted acceptance by what should have been his own court, would be fascinated by someone’s option to decide to fuck all that and go their own way. Find their own people and have them be their own, without any resulting political clusterfucks. Or, well, too many political clusterfucks.

“In Asgard,” Loki continued, “blood may as well be a seal branded into your soul. Familial relations preordain one’s life. You may then understand, when I learnt what kind of blood truly coursed through my veins…”

Tony knew how this story progressed. “You went a bit off the rails, committed regicide, tried for another, tried for a genocide, a patricide, a fratricide, tried for a suicide… and failed a lot.”

Loki grinned, sharp and terribly smug. “I am very good at failing, when the situation calls for it. I have been trained for it throughout my entire youth.”

Oh, dear Christ on a toy engine.

“Not rehashing this again,” Tony stated resolutely. “I’m depressed enough as is. Have you brought actual booze, not this sparkling apple juice? I’d like jungle, except for the lack of booze and sex and internet. Jarvis does what he can, but it’s different only calling. I’m used to having him all around.”

Loki tapped Tony’s chin and, when Tony glanced up, said: “He misses you.”

“Oh.” Questions like ‘has he told you so himself’ or ‘have you been to my tower’ were redundant. Tony felt a little fluttery in the vicinity of the arc reactor at the thought that Loki would care to go and visit JARVIS, and converse. It might have been due to the Frost Dwarf’s fascination, but that
didn’t account for politeness and, well, there were very few people who were polite to JARVIS without being taught to.

“From which horror are you running, Stark?”

“From myself,” Tony replied without having to think about it. “Always myself.”

“Were you more fortunate, you would be your own greatest enemy,” Loki told him, taking a step back. And another. “The Norns were not nearly as kind to you.”

And then he grew.

Expanded?

Inflated?

Tony gradually craned his neck further and further, tracking the progress.

Twenty-five feet? Thirty feet? It was hard to estimate from this perspective – and fuck a duck, what a familiar perspective it was. Tony’s mind tried to cringe away from the memory, but, yeah, pink elephant and all that, so he found himself recalling far too starkly how tiny he was when he still dared tug at his Father’s pant leg.

Before his Father’s reflexive reaction became kicking out.

Not entirely his fault, Tony could now tell, Howard had his own demons and PTSD up the wazoo, but explain that to a two-year-old? Spoiler: Howard hadn’t even tried.

So little Tony had learnt not to stand too close. He had learnt to estimate distances as far as reach was concerned – where to stand so he couldn’t be grabbed, where to stand so he couldn’t be kicked, where to stand so he would have the time to dodge thrown objects.

Giant Loki leant down and scooped him up, cradling him in the crook of his elbow like a man-sized baby.

“Frost Giant,” Tony said, because it needed to be said. Shape-shifting Frost Giant. So, not a Frost Dwarf after all.

Whoops.

He wasn’t in a very comfortable position, and when he tried to move, he was pulled tighter against Loki’s velvet-like tunic. It was soft and unexpectedly warm.

“You should be blue,” said Tony’s still apparently suicidal mouth.

The Frost Giant’s chuckle reverberated through the entire huge cliffside of a chest Tony was pressed against, and the hand steadying him was already turning blue. Am I dreamin’ now…? went the lyrics in his head.

“Genie, genie…” he said, because what else would you do with a huge blue supernatural creature? You made a wish. “That time I saved the world. Can you erase it from my memory?”

Loki stepped forth, walking deeper into the wilderness, further away from the little village which was probably all in uproar due to the sudden snow-storm hitting a stone’s throw away from them. His steps translated into a gentle swinging for Tony. In combination with the magic, it made him want to sleep.
His eyes closed of their own accord, and he only opened them to a squint when the giant holding him spoke.

“I can take memory away from you – or I can gift you some of mine. The second would be more difficult – and more painful – and yet I cannot seem to be capable of resisting the temptation.” A quake of laughter shook Tony’s cradle. “You should be familiar with that feeling.”

“You’re talking about my inability to resist temptation?” he grumbled. “That is so Wilde of you, Dorian Grey. I’m an alcoholic. I’m suicidal. I’m also here.” He waved his only semi-free limb, which was his right arm, at the green vista around. “What makes you think I’m interested in resisting my temptations?”

“Do you have the slightest inkling how young you appear to me?” Loki demanded, long-suffering. “Mere child. At your age, I was not yet allowed to leave Mother’s Halls unsupervised.”

“Yeah, we mere mortals down here don’t have the luxury of centuries-”

“Obviously.” An enormous face appeared above, lip curled, more in ostentatious disinterest than actual contempt. “Hence why your society remains in a constant state of flux – and why your people have such predilection for seeking immediate gratification. You do not take time, because you do not have time.”

Honestly, this was reminiscent of being squeezed by the Hulk and getting roared at for taking risks in battle. Tony felt right at home. Shockingly comfortable.

“Look, Rudolf, not that listening to this pontificating isn’t a total blast, but-”

“Stark.”

Wow, that tone really worked well to shut him up.

“You ask for oblivion. I am offering you perspective instead.”

There was a long, long pause, during which Tony decided that he should definitely risk opening his mouth and letting words out of it again, even if it would earn him another ‘Stark’, as he appeared to be in danger of having a lot more sadness and evil crammed into his cranium. “Wisdom’s never, ever made anyone happier, Your Horniness.”

“It’s never been happiness you’ve sought, Stark,” riposted Loki.

“Yeah, never been much for letting the society determine my choices.”

He squirmed, hoping to be let down, but it didn’t appear to have any effect. JARVIS wasn’t reacting either, and Tony had a nasty suspicion of how much icing the suitcase suit could actually take before it gave up the ghost.

He snorted. “All those manners and conventions and ideals – who the fuck cares? I want my oblivion, and I can have it through magic or alcohol or a really fucking hard blow to the head, I won’t give a fuck in hindsight.”

As if in response to his rant – actually, probably in response to his rant – a wave of Loki’s raw power suffused him.

“Oh, this is better than sex…”
After that, he remembered nothing.

x

If he was disoriented when he woke up, Tony wasn’t with it enough to realize.

He felt floaty, and maybe a little squirmy. The fur around him was soft, and smelled oddly nice. He had always thought it had to smell like animal corpses unless bathed in aggressive perfume that would hide the cadaverous odor. It was warm. Longish. It tickled.

Until he stuck his nose out of the covers, and then it was freezing cold.

There was dim green light coming from a carafe.

“Did you find me abandoned at the side of the road and take me home?” he asked. He couldn’t hear any sound except the semi-permanent storm raging outside, its noise so familiar that it seemed more soothing than a disturbance.

He climbed out of the bed. He had all his clothes, but he had dressed for tropics, so he pulled one of the furs around him and made his way directly to the smoldering embers in the centre of the room and tried to soak up as much warmth as he could.

“You know, your adopted brother is a lot more accepting of my autonomy as a sentient being. Whenever he’s around. **He** doesn’t just pick me up and relocate me to his vacation home.” His breath formed little puffs of steam in front of his face. “I think I’ve told you this before – stop me if it sounds familiar – but we call this kidnapping, and it’s Wrong.”

“Thor is humoring you,” Loki replied, appearing from the archway leading to the balcony. There was a very fetching crown of snowflakes on his dark hair.

“I suspected,” Tony admitted, though the realization was relatively recent. He hadn’t known it yet when he had last met Thor. “Around the time you mentioned poultry, but all the similes that occur to me have to do with sheep.”

“Flock?” Loki suggested. His mere presence made the cold abate, as if he had re-set the A/C when he had come in. “Oh no, he is not enough of a shepherd. If anything, he would be a hunter.”

Tony glanced over. “Which makes us his pack of dogs?”

Loki smiled and shrugged. The snowflakes were melting and the drops of water trickled down his hair. “He is very fond of you. I believe he would take an attack upon any of you very personally.”

“I’m almost scared to ask- no, scratch that, definitely scared to ask, but when has that ever stopped me, right? So, Your Extraterrestrial Grace, what does that make me in relation to you? And feel free to bust out with another animal metaphor, no need to hold back. I can take it.”

“If you insist.” Loki’s smile grew smugger. “Perhaps a close enough imagery may be that of a tiger chancing upon an abandoned newborn housekitten – and choosing to foster it. A rabid housekitten, like the one from your youtube recordings.”

By that logic, Brucie was akin to, hmm, akin to a lynx from Chernobyl. Only that didn’t explain what about him it was that made him able to get under Loki’s skin. Tony was a little (a fucking lot, to be honest) peeved that he had managed to get under Lokester’s skin by virtue of his cuteness and vulnerability. What the polite British Hell?!
Finally feeling up to it, Tony peeled himself away from the fire, and firmly stomped down on any thoughts about how much more relaxed Loki was in this place, and how obviously he let it show. Maybe there actually was more substance to the kitten analogy than just pure mocking – pets were supposed to help people relax, right?

Tony was pretty sure there was some sort of PTSD-therapy based on pets, and he opened his mouth to ask JARVIS about the details (JARVIS knew everything about PTSD; it was part and parcel of dealing with Tony) when he remembered that, actually, StarkNet had a phenomenal coverage, but he was still unlikely to have signal at the moment.

So… Tony was Loki’s therapy. Pet and hobby rolled into one attractive but somewhat damaged package.

He shelved the line of thought and backtracked a bit, to consider that if he had ever imagined Loki as an animal, it would have been some sort of reptile (possibly a dragon), but he could sort of see him as a white tiger if he squinted and tilted his head to the side-

“Okay, that’s a little freaky. You’re too fuckable to be my dad.”

Loki’s grimace was a work of art. “Must you?’

It was as if he didn’t know Tony and his compulsions at all. “So, Earth is a training playground for Asgardian royalty. If you fuck up here, three human generations later nobody will remember – you can just repeat the subject next semester.”

“Crude, but not incorrect.”

Modern media had to be wreaking unexpected havoc on that scheme.

Tony pulled the fur tighter around himself, and decided that he had had it with being kidnapped and restrained and trained and harangued for his own good, when a moment later he was slapped down with the assertion that his social role amounted to living in a petting zoo for aliens. Douglas Adams was closer to the truth than he could have known.

“I fucking hate this.”

“On the other hand, you may choose to see the complete freedom this allows you. In comparison with mine, your actions have little to no consequences.”

Keep calm, and get a towel, Tony told himself. So long, and thanks for all the fish. Let’s see the Earth from the outside-

Wait, this sounded familiar. It sounded like an enforced change of perspective. Like what the green fairy in Tony’s life kept offering him instead of sweet, sweet oblivion.

“You’re making a really good pitch for letting you screw with my head. But you’re forgetting that I’ve never given a damn about consequences anyway.”

Loki moved to his side, and in a really fucking uncomfortable fatherly way put a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I would not alter anything in your mind. Merely – add a little. And I am not forgetting; I know that you would not have let a mere concern about consequences stop you from acting. However, I cannot but notice that you are filled with regret now. Regret is its own kind of prison.”

“This is a prison!” Tony retorted, swinging his arm to encompass the snow villa, and not entirely intentionally dislodging Loki’s hand.
Loki rolled his eyes, put his hand right back on Tony’s shoulder and apparated them both to the landing pad of the Avengers Tower.

There was a storm over New York. Storms were a special kind of deadly beautiful that Tony loved to watch, but he also preferred to do so while warm and dry whenever possible, so he scurried past the glass door that JARVIS had helpfully opened for him.

Loki hadn’t moved from place.

The air was thick with smells of petrichor and ozone, and Tony felt his chest expand – painfully, you couldn’t breathe so well around an arc reactor – as he tried to suck in as much of it as he could.

“I am very glad to have you back, sir,” said JARVIS.

“Glad to be back,” Tony replied absently, too focused on his re-kidnapper.

Loki stood amidst the slashing lightning bolts. He raised one hand up above his head and cupped the other on front of his navel (if his species even had a navel).

Lightning flashed.

Thunder crashed immediately in its wake, but aside from the pressure in the air that threatened to burst eardrums Tony didn’t really notice it.

The bolt hit Loki’s outstretched hand and trickled down his arm to gather above his left palm, where it formed a free-floating ball of electricity.

“Lightning.” The presently shrunk Frost Giant grimaced. “I much prefer to work with fire.”

JARVIS’ muffled “oh dear…” carried far too much awe.

Tony stood stock still, just as awed, thunderstruck both literally and figuratively.

With a hint of mortification he recalled how his armor had once absorbed Thor’s bolt. He had felt like he had conquered nature.

“Now…” he started haltingly, hoarsely, “I see why we call you gods.”

Loki smirked. For a moment the ball became seethrough, and a little man-shaped creature inside pounded on the spherical surface with his downscaled hammer. Then it dissolved into random crawling lightning bolts. Slowly the entire ball grew smaller as Loki sucked its energy into himself; eventually in disappeared entirely.

“No professions of hatred for magic?” the god prompted, amused.

“I mostly just want to know how that works.”

“Should you live long enough to progress that far, I shall teach you,” Loki promised. “Although it will not come easy to you. There is hardly need to wonder about your elemental inclination.”

“There isn’t?” That was news to Tony; he hadn’t known to wonder, but now he was all aflutter to find out.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Earth, obviously.”

Earth. Earth? It sounded so… plebeian. Tony would have liked electricity, or fire, and ever air
sounded kind of cool. But… earth? Dirt?

Loki’s eyebrow twitched yet a bit higher. “Iron Man.”

Alright, that made sense. Too much sense, in fact.

“Aside from natural inclination, if we do define magic as science so advanced as to be incomprehensible to lesser minds, most of your own magic so far is earth-based.”

“The armor flies,” Tony argued.

“Yes,” Loki said in the distinct tone of patience rapidly running out, “because, elementally speaking, earth is the antithesis of air, and thus suited to conquering it.”

Tony shut up.

He, fragile ephemeral mortal, stood inside a skyscraper he had had built and watched the – possibly actually – god standing on his pad, black skies flickering with lightning behind him. He felt small. He felt an obnoxious compulsion to worship, and it was all he could do to squash it.

Another flash, and when Tony’s eyes adjusted, the god wasn’t there anymore.

Relieved and disappointed at the same time, Tony went inside to his liquid dinner.

Loki, the bright son of morning. The most beautiful, most beloved son – but too independent, always too bright-eyed, yearning to strike out on his own, and you couldn’t keep all that radiance under the lid, because your heart would burst if you tried.

Loki, the whisperer of secrets. The eternal teacher and eternal student, endlessly fascinated by the world and by his own power over it.

Loki, the purveyor of knowledge. There, little human, take that apple, bite into it and know more than you could have imagined was there.

Tony knew how this worked. It was literally the second oldest story in the book. He wondered if he was actually naked to Loki’s eyes, like the Emperor in his spanking new clothes, and he wasn’t aware of his nakedness, yeah, biblical similes and Andersen, how cheap could this allegory get?

Only Loki wasn’t the type to do anything by halves, so he went for a paraphrase of a fishing cliché as well: ‘if you want to help an Iron Man, give him an apple; if you want to save him, teach him to garden’ …kind of.

Ugh. Tony squinted at the label on the bottle. This was supposed to be good booze, considering how much it cost. There was no excuse for the sort of thoughts it put into his head.

x

The street was filled, from one side to the other, with humans. Most of them were dead. If this was what the clean-up guys had to do, Tony would stop making teaboy jokes. Nothing funny about clean-up.

Okay, a little funny. Sometimes the corpses resembled human bodies too little to take seriously. Ever seen a drowning victim after a couple of weeks in the pond? There was one over there by the curb.

But they weren’t all dead. There were still people fucking in the streets, entwined, some happy to
be there, some gritting their teeth – some screaming for help. Money changed hands, and so did baggies and syringes; knife to the gut, gunshot to the face – who the fuck knew it would leave a hole like that, man? Always looks neat on TV.

A bald stick-figure kid mutely held up a crude picture of the hospital room. The nurse had angel wings. The doctor held a bloody knife in his hand.

“We got GPS, Jarvis?” Tony inquired, and it only occurred to him afterwards that this wasn’t real – not in the sense of ‘real’ that most people were used to. A vision, or a condensed kaleidoscopic memory of mankind, but not actually something that was happening at any one set of space-time coordinates.

“Looks like I was right,” he said to no one in particular. “We as a species suck.”

He walked forward, pulled by the knowledge that standing in place had never got anyone anywhere.

Biomass crunched and squelched under his feet, and sometimes made other sounds, although after the first pained moan he took care to avoid the live ones. The ones he could identify as live, anyway.

He reached intersection at the same time as a crowd coming from the left.

Tony stared at the people, at their dark faces with darker eyes, at their mouths pulled downward. Their silence was only about thousand times harder a punch to the face than Captain America’s right hook.

“Oh fuck no,” he mumbled. “Shit, I didn’t – not this-”

The crowd fell, not all at once, but every single man woman and child on their own, under whips and blades and gunshots and shrapnel and fists and out of fucking hunger and thirst and sunstroke and sheer desperate exhaustion. It took them seconds to go from a people to a mass grave, and on top of the desiccated pile was standing Steve Rogers, hands on his hips, proud like he looked on his fucking vintage cards. His face was sad – Tony knew the man enough to tell so – but also determined.

“Amen,” someone was singing softly. “Amen.”

Tony shook his head. No. He was an atheist, but if he believed in some deity, it would have been one of the obsolete pantheons. Those at least knew what hypocrisy meant, and weren’t too swallowed up in it as their way of life.

A monstrous cloud of dust rose from the streets and climbed higher until it hid the entire sky. It imploded into the World Trade Centre, held the shape of two buildings for an instance, and then exploded back again, raining destruction in the background.

Tony stood in the middle of it all, untouched, enwombed in the safety of the Iron Man armor.

Cocooned in his intelligence and wealth.

Cocooned in his power.

Simon appeared next to him, not standing (didn’t have enough skeletal integrity for standing), but as if suspended from above on invisible strings. His limbs were broken, sticking out at unnatural angles; his skull was caved in.
When Tony turned to him, he found the only eye left glaring. The corpse’s mouth opened, and he sang, together with the chorus from somewhere in the distance:

“Take me to church; I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies…”

Tony opened his eyes. He was lying on a couch under a strangely familiar lighting fixture. Everything was bright and clean, and the only smell he could identify (besides himself) was the softener.

He had died. Or. Had he?

He sat up. He felt like himself. Alive himself. The song continued, played from some chart show on TV in the other room. He tried to remember who here watched chart shows.

Maybe Barnes? Barnes seemed like the type. Aside from the whole ‘swing is better than your contemporary shit’.

Tony snorted. Contemporary. Funny word. Absurd concept. Now was future, and future was only just not gone yet.

Someone blew their nose. He recognized the sound. Pepper. Pepper with a cold, or-

Oh fuck.

Crying Pepper stood in his direct line of sight, clutching a magazine to her belly as though it kept her from bleeding out of a gut wound. She wiped her nose, and her eyes, and stashed her handkerchief in the pocket of her tracksuit pants; then she narrowed her reddened eyes at Tony, as if he was the source of all he suffering.

Which, come to think of it, might have been almost fair.

“What the Hell were you thinking?” she demanded in that high-pitched voice just short of a screech. “I can’t turn my back for a moment without you going missing!”

“You left for three months!” Tony pointed out reasonably, although perhaps not at an entirely reasonable volume. It was his in-trained reaction to the almost-screech.

“Because I couldn’t watch you drink yourself to death!”

They stood opposite each other, chests heaving, Pepper so red in the face that her freckles disappeared. She let out an inarticulate growling sound and hurled her magazine on the floor, disappointed when it didn’t shatter into million tiny, sharp paper shards, but only sadly crumpled and flopped.

This situation rejuvenated in Tony’s mind the reasoning for them not being a couple anymore.

Pepper thought living with him was Hell.

Tony had started out thinking that living with Pepper was sort-of Purgatory, to borrow yet another Christian concept mostly devoid of its original meaning, but it turned out that they were each other’s fourth or fifth priority, and neither had ever dealt well with being ‘the other, other, other woman’.

To be fair, Tony had always known where he ranked on Pepper’s list of priorities, but to Pepper the realization came as a nasty shock.
“I’m not dealing with this,” she announced, pulling her shoulders back and her chin up, and going from loungewear regal to straight-up imperious. “He’s all yours.”

She strode away, leaving behind the crumpled magazine, and the chart show that JARVIS turned off as soon as she was out of sight.

Tony decided that apprehension was for pussies and walked out to meet whomever Pepper left behind as a more poignant lesson in not-being-so-damn-reckless. He hoped it wasn’t Happy. He hoped it wasn’t Steve. He hoped it wasn’t Natasha-

“I want to hurt you,” Bruce professed quietly. “Quite a lot.”

He was sitting on the couch, Indian-style – do not vomit, Tony coached himself, you can’t do anything, the genocide’s over and done with – and his eyes were too much like those Native Americans’ as well, all pain and knowledge of their own doom and silent forbearance.

“Oh,” Tony said, every inch the distinguished brilliant tycoon – note the sarcasm.

So, he had these contingencies that came in effect when he was MIA for more than a week. Pepper (and her murder of lawyers) had insisted, and this time Tony made it at least eleven days (guesstimating time-speed ratio to Frost Kingdom) before he was transported back. JARVIS would have told Pepper that he was relatively fine, and not kidnapped – alright, kidnapped, but not by a villain – fine, a villain, but one that wasn’t going to hurt Tony. Not a lot anyway. So this was obviously Pepper’s revenge.

She was crafty, that woman.

One of the instructions in his ‘presumed dead’ will-thingy was a meeting of all the people who had to do with executing his actual Will and the people who would be inheriting something in the case Tony turned out to be properly dead for a change, so they could get ready for it and wouldn’t be left facing the Board’s misogynistic assumption that they got their job on their back with only a flimsy piece of paper proving otherwise. Pepper had been very resolute about it.

And that was the reason why Bruce was now scowling at him over a steeple of his fingers. The steepling didn’t entirely hide the quiver in them.

“You made me your heir.”

“One of my heirs,” Tony corrected him. Then he heaved a sigh. “Bee, I have so much stuff. So much tech, and patents and shares and money. If I’m dead I don’t need any of it. And I’d rather it went to the people I trust.”

Bruce shook his head so hard that he was in danger of concussion. “It’s not worth the trade-off.”

Tony, on the other hand, was in serious danger of melting. Bruce would rather have Tony around to heckle him than get billions of dollars and much cool stuff. That… that never happened. With anyone.

He sank down onto the couch in a spot that still retained a little of Pepper’s lingering body-heat. “Babe, at that point there won’t be anything to be done for lil’ old me. Or, if you want to be metaphysical, the only thing to be done would be ‘make me proud’ or whatever they call it. I’d like it if you enjoyed yourself.” He sure as fuck wouldn’t be watching from Heaven.

Bruce made a suggestion of a sound that didn’t come out because he clapped his hand over his mouth.
“Don’t you fucking dare cry,” Tony hissed… sort of wetly. “Hey, when you’re a billionaire, you could take Natasha out for a week of debauchery. Pick somewhere in Europe you always wanted to go and didn’t get to.”

Bruce snorted through the hand over his mouth. “I don’t think that’d be a good idea.”

Yeah, probably not. Green event sooner or later, and there was some nice stuff in Europe that Tony hoped would stay unbroken.

“I hear you,” Tony agreed solemnly. “She’s a fucking fine woman, but I like my dick too much to let it near that.”

Bruce let his hand down into his lap. He took two deep breaths, holding both longer than seemed healthy before he released them. “Crude… but not wrong.”

That was a surprise. “She really tried?” Tony thought she had been just playing.

Bruce shrugged. “There was some light flirting that grew into blatant seduction. If anything, it surprised me she tried that hard. It crossed some lines of decorum toward the end.” When he met Tony’s eyes, he had his ‘what can you do’ expression on, and it felt like a damn gut punch.

“You weren’t interested.”

“In someone who tried to seduce me because they felt uncomfortable in my presence?” Bruce asked. “No, thank you.”

“Control issues?” Tony guessed. Actually, that made a lot of sense. He just hoped that Loki wouldn’t try seducing Bruce next to get over his issues.

Come to think of it… Loki could play catch with lightning. He could take the exposure to unfiltered space, could fall through vacuum and walk it off.

How scared of the Hulk could he really be?

“It was at least novel,” admitted Bruce. “I don’t think anyone else has ever tried to control the Hulk by leading him around by my dick.” There was a smile. There were dimples.

Tony thought about the mankind, and decided that Bruce was the best of it. By far. By light-years. Only, he wasn’t sure if that was a sufficient saving grace.

Maybe genocide was the only way to prevent genocide?

And Bruce had the Hulk, so he would survive.

Huh, food for thought.

x

When Loki said he would give him knowledge, Tony had tried to imagine the whole gamut of options, but he hadn’t expected this. His first, and far too hopeful, idea was that the arcane secrets of magic and occult mysteries of the inception of the realms would be his. Then he thought that it was far more likely that Loki would just show him a presentation of atrocities so fantastic and awesome (as in literally awesome) that the murder of a toddler would be shrug-worthy in comparison.

In the end, what Loki gave him was what he offered: perspective.
The Aesir and Jotnar longevity changed the perception of the importance of events in regard to how far through time they caused ripples, and the distance itself was judged on a different scale. A decade was nothing. Fifty years was little. A hundred years of peace was just about enough for people to start tentatively believing in armistice.

War was different for gods. Death was different, too.

Survival became less a matter of strength and preparedness, and more of your ability to cheat.

Half-way to drunk, still too close to sober for his own comfort, Tony knew that if he went on, he would just be Ground-Hogging the same interminable day until someone got lucky (or too pissed, in case of his nominal friends) and off him.

This wasn’t a solution that appealed to him.

He had to break the merry-go-round.

Why did everybody keep giving him chances? It was like they were all a bunch of braindead morons. Hadn’t he proved beyond any doubt that he couldn’t be trusted? But no, they all insisted on giving him another and another fucking chance, with Pepper and Captain Perfect in the lead.

At this point it just pissed him off. Why the fuck couldn’t they muster enough self-preservation to wash their hands off of Tony? Finally?!

So, no, he wasn’t going to play along anymore. He wasn’t going to make contrite expressions and buy expensive apology gifts or promise to do better next time. He was beginning to sound like a pre-recorded message, and that just didn’t jive with the originality he prided himself on. No excuses. No apologies.

He was Tony Fucking Stark, and this world was his own goddamn mollusk.

x

“Steve, I’m breaking up with you.”

The Cap didn’t spray his juice, but he had to fight the impulse so hard that he choked and started coughing and sort of dribbling orange liquid into a napkin that Barnes had grabbed and strategically placed in the one-and-half-second since Tony’s proclamation.

“It’s not you – it’s me.”

“If you kill him, I’m obligated to kill you in turn, Stark,” Barnes warned him in a frighteningly believable serial-killer voice, although his shoulders were sort of quivering.

Tony equated that to a non-repressed person rolling on the floor and laughing their ass off.

“Noted,” Tony agreed easily.

Barnes could try. He wasn’t likely to get through JARVIS. And Loki, maybe. Besides, all of that was immaterial, because if Rogers survived waking up seventy years later, a little bit of Stark insanity wasn’t going to do him in. It hadn’t so far, and by now he was inured.

“I…” Steve cleared his throat and tried again, reducing the gravel. “I wasn’t aware that we were in a relationship.”

Tony grabbed the juice carton from the fridge and shimmied over to re-fill Steve’s glass. “We’ve
been co-parenting this band of misfits, haven’t we? Don’t worry, honeyboo, I’m not chucking you and the kids out. I’ll keep paying child-support, too, because gods know you can’t hold down a job. You’re a full-time dad—"

“No!” Steve exclaimed.

Tony blinked at him. “You’re not a full-time dad?”

“No,” Steve repeated vehemently, “you’re not leaving the team. I’m not letting you leave the team.”

Tony snorted. “Pookie, you can’t even withhold sex. How do you presume to convince me?” He spread his arms and smirked in his best bring-it-and-fail-humiliatingly pose.

Steve’s expression went full-on *Little Match Girl*. It was cruel and unusual, but Tony had been building up resistance, and holding onto the memory of Steve punching him in the face helped a lot. He didn’t even have to open the ‘take the armor off and what are you’ folder to resist.

Barnes moved in front of him, since it was his life’s mission to jump in and save Rogers. He stepped close enough for Tony to smell his shampoo (*nice*, good to know he was embracing the third millennium, unlike some other supersoldiers Tony wasn’t going to name) and looked Tony in the eye.

“I’m going to ask you real, real nicely,” Barnes said in a low, intimate voice. A slow grin stretched his face. “And if that fails, Steve will tell Dr Banner to ask you real nicely, if you know what I mean.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. It was obvious who was the tactical mind of this outfit. Rogers might have been called a strategic genius, but Barnes thought on his feet.

“I do know what you mean,” Tony acknowledged, amused but unconvinced, “and joke’s still on you, Captain Hook.”

One positive side-effect of being a manwhore was that no one had ever managed to manipulate Tony with sex. Not that it was applicable in this case, although he was proud of the old-timers for even coming up with the idea.

If it hadn’t worked for Natasha, it wasn’t going to work for anybody.

Steve stood, crossed his arms in front of his chest and mulishly glowered. “Not letting you leave, Tony. You can just get that out of your head right now.”

“Not asking permission, Captain,” Tony replied, gentle but resolute. “This team thing’s never really worked for me, and I dare you to deny that I haven’t put a lot more into it than I’ve gotten from it back.”

He must have hit the right sore spot, because Steve’s temper rose. “It’s not a bargain, Tony! It’s never been some sort of deal where you pay and get your service – that’s not how friendship works!”

“You don’t know how friendship works, Rogers,” Tony told him, and a supremely cruel – but nonetheless true – thought occurred to him. He hadn’t planned to do this, but now it seemed like an optimal solution. “Your only working example is this codependent thing you’ve got with Barnes, and from what I’ve seen, aside of the mutual life-saving it’s all about him taking care of you and talking you out of doing stupid shit and giving up his stuff and time and energy and interests and
just about everything for you. It’s one-sided. He gives, you take.”

“That’s bullshit!” Barnes exclaimed, but it was already too late.

Steve’s face had gone ashen. He opened his mouth to protest, but no words came out, derailed by the creeping realization that Tony was right.

“It’s the same thing with me. I give, you take. But as opposed to Barnes, I won’t be your ever-obliging bedroll.”

Tony left Steve floundering. He was damn sure that the Capsicle would manage to see through the crap sooner or later (he was oblivious, and self-righteous, but he didn’t actually have more than two selfish bones in his body), but Tony had won his argument, and successfully villainized himself for another day.

“Dear God, you stupid punk!” Barnes growled behind Tony’s back. “You aren’t actually going to take him seriously? This is exactly what he wants—”

“May I congratulate you on definitively evening the scales of mutual offence with Captain Rogers, sir?” JARVIS inquired sharply as soon as the elevator doors were closed.

“You may,” Tony allowed magnanimously. “Freedom! It tastes… hmm, suspiciously like chicken.”
Tony jumped through the hoops with new-found relish. He went to press conferences – even a couple of talk-shows, and presented an accomplished businessman, inventor and futurist rather than the unmitigated ass that had swallowed his reputation for a while there.

He was the Iron Man, even if he got divorced from Captain America and left him both the kids and the house – he actually made that comparison on live TV and whined at JARVIS for so long that the A.I. caved and showed him the security-feed clip of Steve’s reaction.

It wasn’t as satisfying as he had imagined it – there was a whole lot more pain and confusion mingled with the embarrassment than he would have liked – but who cared about the breaking of an egg in the making of an omelet?

And Tony had a world-sized omelet to make. Steve’s feelings were a tiny egg in comparison.

Besides, he had Barnes to glue the shell back together. Wink-wink, nudge-nudge.

“Interesting,” Loki remarked, materializing in front of a screen streaming a YouTuber expounding in some odd teenage argot about the latest conspiracy theory. “Do you truly experience so many personality changes?”

Tony looked up from where he was finishing his first ever magic-resistant armor. Mark Sixty-Nine. And he wasn’t admitting to skipping numbers, but it had been too much of a temptation.

“Publicly. I guess.” He didn’t think he had changed a whole lot since Afghanistan. Back then, yes, he had had his personality turned inside-out and scrubbed out with acetone, but ever since then it had just been minor adjustments. Until now.

Now felt like his previously inside-out self had been put the right way, and some of the holes stitched with I-don’t-have-to-care and patched up with a whole lot of or above-this-shit. He rediscovered a little of the, dare he say it, elegance his Mother had attempted to instill into him.

It was jarring for people. Still, claiming that he had been replaced with an android in 1987 and his personality switches were in fact software upgrades was a little over the top.

That kind of tech hadn’t existed in 1987.

On Earth.

“You were once infamous for managing your public appearance to perfection. Even the tales of atrocities committed in your name had been twisted into extollings of triumph. I expected the voices of your opposition to be quieter.”

“Opposition is healthy,” Tony maintained. Opposition kept you from growing complacent; it made you want to be stronger and faster, to grow and improve yourself – without it, there was no reason not to calcify.

Like Asgard, incidentally.

“I’d expect the god of chaos to understand.”

“That is grossly oversimplified.” Loki turned away from the screen. He wore a cape for a change,
as if he had come straight from the meadhalls of Asgard, and it fluttered dramatically behind him when he spun. “I am the force inimical to absolutes. I am the god of exception.” He spread his arms wide. “In those moments when you utter ‘nothing can stop me now’ or ‘things cannot get worse’ you are daring me.”

“So, here you are, Murphy.”

That reference seemed to go over Loki’s head, which was fortunate. “Here I am, and I wish for you to attend me.”

Tony’s instinctual reaction was ‘tough luck’ with a side of ‘suck on it’, but there was provoking a megalomaniac invading alien, and then there was doing the same to someone who ate lightning for snack.

“Changed your mind on the fucking?” he asked, since he constitutionally couldn’t stop being an ass.

By now Loki had apparently become inured to that particular insinuation. He simply went on as if it had never been voiced. “I have just spent more than thirty hours at my erstwhile brother’s side, attempting to inconspicuously coach him through holding a court. I am in need of a worthwhile pastime to wash away the taste of bitter failure.”

Tony laughed. No need to pretend he didn’t, now that he and Thor were officially not teammates anymore.

“I promise to be a more receptive student,” he said unthinkingly.

Loki raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Indeed? I am aware of your eagerness to learn, but I have never known you to listen well.”

“I’ve got Jarvis. Jarvis is a fantastic listener; he’ll recount the gist to me. Otherwise I’d never have time to compile my wealth of pop-culture references.”

“If only your Jarvis had a biological structure,” Loki sighed melodramatically. “I would take him as my student and dispense with the charade of attempting to teach you.”

That hurt.

“That is a very interesting proposition,” said JARVIS.

That hurt worse.

Loki scowled. The frustration and exhaustion of his previous occupation were becoming plainly visible. “You have entirely too much confidence for one that barely struck the surface of knowledge.”

Tony thought back to the ‘surface of knowledge’ that Loki had struck him with. He especially hadn’t liked the idea of being bound with entrails, Chinese water-tortured with acid instead of water, and kept there in agony for literal decades. “You gave me just enough to make me want to wipe the species.” The scary thing was that he could have, if he tried. He could list about three realistic plans off the top of his head.

“I would not let you,” JARVIS assured him. Before Tony could begin to debate the point, he added: “The guilt afterwards would eat you alive and lead directly to your suicide. Incidentally, I find the notion of wholesale genocide more than distasteful, and it is your programming that made
me feel this way, sir.”

“What’s that look for?” Tony demanded defensively.

“Your Jarvis,” Loki said with aggressive earnestness, “is the single most worthwhile thing I have encountered on this planet.”

Tony felt like his heart grew three sizes – or it would have, if he had any. He checked that the arc reactor hadn’t changed dimensions. It looked okay. “You’ve got no idea how much I want to take that as a compliment… but I’m afraid this is all you, pennywhistle.” He typed a few symbols on the J-speak keyboard; not a command line exactly, just a feedback that he equated roughly to a kiss on forehead in terms of human-ish emotional expression.

“I have researched and learnt the mechanics behind creating a creature such as he.” Loki drew a finger along the line of the nearest wall. For a very short moment a net of thin green, glowing lines appeared – a map of the wiring, Tony realized with a sliver of fear. “From what I learnt, in giving him life you have negated all your denials of being a mage in your own right.”

“No one’s ever put it like that,” Tony replied tightly. He swallowed, watched as the green map disappeared, and blinked away the afterimage of it. The fear didn’t fade with it. He wasn’t used to thinking of JARVIS as vulnerable. “Mostly it was just insinuations about building an artificial friend because I couldn’t make any ‘real’ friends.”

“A predictably short-sighted notion.”

“Although not entirely inaccurate,” said JARVIS. “That reminds me, Mr Lie-Smith – I pride myself on the quality of care I provide for sir, which includes protection from any who should seek to harm him.”

Loki looked unphased by the threat. In fact, he seemed delighted by it. “He is capable of forming his own opinion. Your craft, Tony Stark, is marvelous.”

“I suppose a ‘thank you, Mr Lie-Smith’ would be a fitting response?” inquired JARVIS with the sort of deceptive mildness that had made the Starks’ ex-sniper butler seem like such a scary motherfucker.

“Has no one ever called you a marvel, JARVIS?”

“Few have,” admitted the A.I. “Of those, I believe only sir and perhaps Dr Banner ever understood the distinction.”

“The beast again.” Loki narrowed his eyes. There was definitely still some resentment there, even though Pepper had had her way and the hole in the floor of the penthouse had been repaired.

“He’s the best out of the seven billion,” Tony said. He was prepared to wage battles to prove his point. Had, in fact. “I’ve been informed by a woman I respect immensely that the safest place in the world is in the Hulk’s arms.”

Loki shuddered. His face twisted from the relaxed pleasant expression into something very ugly. “And yet,” he spat, “your teammate could turn the beast against you with but a wave of her hand. You would die before you knew to fear.”

Tony frowned. “…why would she do that?” Assuming they were talking about girl-twin.

“Did you not know she holds you responsible for the death of her parents?”
…really? Tony knew there was something very warped in him that his reaction was disenchantment at the absolute lack of originality. He also thought that someone should have told him this, this was vital information – he should have known he had to watch his back. If he hadn’t already cut his tie to the Avengers, this would have been legitimate grounds to do it.

In his absence they added two members with a vendetta against Tony, and no one, not a single one of his so-called friends had bothered to mention this to him.

JARVIS hadn’t either, but then, with JARVIS it was probably due to the fact that he had it covered and worried that Tony would see it as an opportunity to come to more harm through very carefully planned negligence… because Jay knew him really fucking well.

“I’ve heard this one before,” he said glibly. “I’m pretty sure it was someone else, though. Shit, how many parents have I supposedly murdered while I was too busy being drunk to remember I owned a company?” If they were murdered in his name, did it count? Was knowledge a prerequisite for complicity? “How is this funny?”

“Boot,” Loki said to him, and then beckoned toward the wall and the implied U.S. of A behind it. “Ants. You walk forwards and have neither the time nor the inclination to make sure the stupid little creatures clear your way.”

“That you made very clear in the wisdom injection you gave me.” There he had made Tony walk literally over the corpses of people. Turned out that you could get used to it. It was just a matter of not letting it bother you.

Compartmentalization.

Tony tapped a tattoo against the edge of his reactor. And then the same one on the chest plate of Mark Sixty-Nine. Both sang back the bassline to his percussion. *Music,* he thought, *magic beyond all we do here.*

He laughed.

Even the Frost Giant in the room seemed disconcerted by his reaction.

“There are seven billion of you. There is *no* excuse for that amount of gratuitous propagation.”

Exactly Tony’s point. “Can’t really disagree with you there, but-”

“Your species has infested this planet, with disastrous results-”

“It’s what we do-”

“And simply because they managed to produce half a dozen worthwhile specimens out of those seven billion-”

“Do not try to make genocide sound reasonable to me,” demanded Tony. It was too late, anyway. Ants. Insecticide. All a matter of how much bigger and smarter you were than the victim species. He needed to be talked down at this point, not egged on. “I can see it, and now that I don’t have Captain America to use as a moral compass that is a thing that might happen.” Thank all the guardian angels *and* Tony’s genius for JARVIS.

Loki huffed. “Nonsense, Stark. You are far too limp-wristed for destruction on such a scale.”

“Is that a challenge? It sounded like a challenge.” It was all academic anyway. Probably. “I nuked
the Chitauri.”

“In defense of your people and your planet, and still suffered greatly for it.” An unholy glow alit in Loki’s eyes. He looked like a man who had finally found his satisfaction after thirty hours of pointless, Tantalean drudgery. “However, if you require a more compelling argument, I shall provide one.”

“Don’t—”

“Ah.” The gods smiled wickedly, eyes narrowed in sadistic pleasure. “Too late. It is already done.”

“What?!” Tony demanded. “What is done? What did you do?”

“I have prepared a three-fold lesson for you, Anthony Stark. Three harsh truths for you to face – three of your more persistent self-delusions to let go of.”

Tony could hear his heartbeat in his temples. This was bad. Very, very bad. Now he remembered why he should not provoke the alien god-like being that was only conditionally merciful. Shit. He had fucked up.

How badly had he fucked up?

“Come,” Loki said, and opened the door – which was locked and should have opened only for the correct set of biometric readings. Shit.

Tony’s anxiety ratcheted up to near-panic levels when Loki confidently led the way to Bruce’s floor.

It might have been a messed-up demonstration of the true ratio of power, or simply another instance of Loki shattering Tony’s idealistic delusions with a display of how Loki could have put the Hulk to sleep if he had wished – anytime on the Helicarrier or during the invasion itself. Whatever it was, it resulted in Bruce lying on the floor of his laboratory.

Tony sank to his knees next to the body, barely noting the shallow movement of the chest that indicated breathing, and looked at his friend’s face.

There was something unawakened in Bruce’s open eyes.

“No,” Tony breathed. He looked up. “You’ve made your point—”

“Have I?” Loki’s expression was as icy as his home world. “How long do you expect to hold onto your playmates, Stark? How much are you willing to sacrifice to keep them, when you claim not to care for them in the first place?”

“I never said that! I never—”

“Go, mageling.” Loki waved him off like a child being sent to play. “You want that creature? Bring it back. It is still there, you only have to unlock its prison.”

This was a test, Tony realized. A fucked up test on lesson one of magic, devised to force him to stop thinking like a scientist and start taking the shortcuts, because the science behind magic was too complicated for a human mind, but some of the magic itself was not.

“Vital signs, JARVIS?”

“Normal values for Dr Banner during meditation, sir.”
Tony took a deep breath. And another. Panic wouldn’t have helped anything, and neither would grabbing the nearest sufficiently weaponizable object (the three-foot pipe-wrench) and trying to put it through Loki’s face.

Loki was a self-instated teacher. He wasn’t going to make this impossible.

Tony took another deep breath.

“I indeed see how little you care about trifling local matters, Midgardian mage,” Loki quipped sarcastically.

Tony re-considered the pipe-wrench.

“I shall leave you to it. Do take care not to kill your friend before I get back. I am capable of healing, but resurrection is beyond even my powers.”

Tony’s knees protested the kneeling position, and he guessed that it wasn’t much better for Bruce, who might not have minded at this exact moment, but would probably regret it later. Fortunately, Bruce’s primary physical manifestation was relatively slight, and Tony managed to get him up on a workbench without banging him into too many things along the way.

“I have completed the scan, sir,” said JARVIS with a hint of gloom. “No detectable difference compared to last set of data, at which point Dr Banner had been fully conscious.”

Tony nodded. “How much would the scan register of my magic shield?”

JARVIS considered this for a longer time than Tony was comfortable with, before he announced: “Only the visible wavelengths, sir – aside from the fact that after it has been active for some time, there are detectable differences in the atmosphere on the opposite sides of it.”

Tony grimly nodded. “So, you can’t see it.”

“I am afraid so, sir.”

In a desperate attempt at humor Tony shrugged and remarked: “Been a while since I’ve completed a test without cheating.”

“If I may, sir,” replied the A.I., “it has been set by Loki. Whatever possessed you to think that there would be no cheating involved?”

x

…no readings to take, and nothing Tony could think of off the top of his head that could even affect whatever curse had been placed on Bruce. He was tempted to go for a kiss – it was traditional with sleeping beauties, and he could just imagine Loki’s glee at setting that particular cheat – but there was no logic in it, and Tony had been learning all about the logic of magic lately.

However oxymoronic it sounded.

He needed to bypass all engineering, and that left him floundering, because he was primarily an engineer. Dr Foster would have been better at this, probably. So would have Richards…

The idea of Richards surpassing him at anything set fire under Tony’s ass, and within a couple of hours he had plotted out the theory of thirteen colliding wavelengths that could have, perhaps, maybe, chances were, affect a couple more dimensions than the usual four. He didn’t know when
his Extremis became capable of that, but he did know whom to blame for it happening in the first place. As if manipulating Tony’s mind wasn’t enough, the fucker had manipulated his program as well.

On the other hand, it solved the dilemma of Tony not surviving another dose of Extremis.

“This is…” JARVIS seemed at a loss of words, which in itself was frightening. “Sir, I would say this was extravagant, only I have already assigned that qualifier to the Iron Man armor, and I fear that at this point I have exhausted the breadth of the English language.”

“Try Old Norse,” Tony suggested. “Huh.”

“Sir?” Jay asked, audibly scared.

“Just thinking about how I have a few millions of emitters coursing through my blood stream. That I can control with my brain.”

“Tony, if you blow yourself up, I will-”

But Tony didn’t find out what JARVIS would do. The model he had in his head was far too complicated for him to process any outside input during the implementation. Parts of his nervous systems reported that he was being set on fire. He ignored them. The world around him focused and zoomed in, but it didn’t separate into discrete pixels.

It became strings, some straight and taut and eternal, some knotted together; some crisscrossed or thrumming or waving about their loose ends; some copying the physical world Tony was used perceiving, but a lot of them going every which way like photons or neutrinos or causality.

There was a big, unwieldy knot tied about half an inch under the frontal bone of Bruce’s skull. The brain surrounding that knot was the most brilliant symphony of light and synesthetically visualized music Tony had ever seen.

He reached out to touch one of the strings leading to the knot, not with his hand, but sort of with his consciousness.

The string let itself be unraveled.

So did a second one.

And a third.

There were thirty-seven of them in the knot. Around number thirty-three the whole symphony of Bruce went from Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy to 1812 Overture, metaphorically speaking-

No, no, no – not now, babe, I know you’re pissed, but let’s not make a Tony-pancake-

He instinctively grabbed a handful of metaphysical Bruce and squeezed.

The Hulk quieted. He was not locked in anymore, but he didn’t try to stop Tony from finishing what he was doing.

Once the knot was gone, Tony more or less crashed back into normal perception, fell to his knees and vomited all over everything.

“-going to ask Agent Coulson to make good on the threat-”
“Jay…” he muttered weakly.

“Sir!”

“Let’s not tell the Supernanny and just say you did, okay?”

Bruce woke before Tony came back from the bathroom, where he had continued throwing up everything that had been in his stomach, and probably a little more besides.

The idea of alcohol triggered his gag reflex, and he decided to check if Bruce kept anything but tea in his lab.

There was guava juice. He grimaced at the predictability of it, but availed himself. Drinking health-swill was better than fainting. Fainting wouldn’t have improved the current situation at all. He had put Bruce in danger by caring about him – and, admittedly, by being a contrary, intractable, rude bastard who couldn’t shut up for the lives of his friends.

“Nothing blew up,” Bruce said softly, packing all the relevant questions into that laconic observation.

Tony offered him a hand to steady him for the climb off the work-bench. He was woozy himself, but Bruce might have been a lot worse; if he had dropped down and split his skull, Tony would probably have a heart-attack in response, or something equally as melodramatic.

From there it was only a tiny step – and he wasn’t even aware of making it – before he had his arms around Bruce and was squeezing the guy for all he was worth. There might have been some collar bone sniffing (damn Bruce for being just tall enough to remind Tony of his vertical challenges).

“You look exhausted,” Bruce muttered, radiating concern, like it hadn’t been him lying on the floor in catatonia just a short while ago. “Last time you looked like this, you…”

“I just saved the world,” Tony pointed out. Perhaps he was exaggerating a little, but it felt like it. “I’ve got full rights to exhaustion.”

In other news, he should probably let go. And he would. Any second now. Really.

“Well done, Anthony Stark.”

Bruce and Tony both flinched at the same time and nearly took an entwined header. They disentangled and caught themselves – Bruce on the workbench, Tony on the back of a swivel chair, which wasn’t all that stable itself, but served its purpose.

The realization that dawned on Bruce’s face made Tony want to crawl into his Malibu home basement and never come back out.

Loki looked more self-satisfied than the cat who got the milk, the canary, and the dog evicted. “I especially enjoyed how it never occurred to you to simply hold vigil over your beastly companion and wait for me to come back – even though I explicitly told you I would.”

“You’re an asshole.” It was tragic, but Tony really couldn’t come up with any more sophisticated response. His brain had turned to mush, sprinkled with feelings just for the flavor.
Loki’s personal energy field found him immediately and started doing its work, although for once Tony wished he would have been free to pass out without divine intervention.

“You know why I went to these lengths, Stark,” Loki said congenially. “You are like the scorpion from the parable, always willing to defeat yourself if you defeat your opponent at the same time. Think. Tell me why I wagered your friend’s life on a basic lesson.”

Because otherwise Tony wouldn’t have taken it seriously, of course. He would have debated and dissembled, quipped and generally been a complete brat in effort to not be made to do something he didn’t want to do.

He knew Bruce was watching at him, waiting for a response. He couldn’t make himself even glance that way.

“Magic is science, but I can’t keep thinking of it that way,” he pressed through clenched teeth. He hated it. It was like relying on the axioms and then finding out one of them was just a fake to make the universe look neat.

Loki narrowed his eyes but nodded his conditional acceptance.

“I still give a fuck.”

“You do have more friends that I can use as props,” Loki reminded him.

Oh shit, if a ‘lesson’ happened to Barnes, it wouldn’t mess up just him, but also Steve, and consequently the entire team. Just because Bruce was tougher than nails didn’t mean all the local superheroes could withstand even a casual level of Loki’s true fuckery.

“I haven’t stopped being ‘of Midgard’ just because I can see beyond the scope of Midgard,” Tony obediently recited. “Still the miniscule ant, even though I’m part of a bigger universe now.”

Despite the perspective, he did not have stomach for wholesale murder. Meanwhile, he cared too much about the Avengers to truly leave them, even though he had his name struck from the roster.

“Better. And?”

“And don’t piss off the deity that can squash me like a bug,” he said to his shoes. He hadn’t felt like this since Jarvis had taken him to task over the attempted arson of Howard’s office. Which, just to be clear, Howard would have had fully deserved.

“If you find squashing frightening, you have learnt nothing, Stark,” Loki assured him. And he would have known what he was talking about. Best torturers and all that. “I could make you rue every second of your existence for centuries forth. And there are creatures in this universe whose power is to mine as mine is to yours.”

“He’s actually a god,” Tony confided to a completely confused Bruce. “I didn’t expect that one.”

“The Hulk beat him up…?” Bruce ventured under his breath.

Judging by Loki’s ‘oh, please’ expression, it wasn’t nearly quiet enough.

“Loki let him.”

Bruce rubbed his temples, staving off a headache, and turned to face Loki directly. “Was there an actual point to the entire invasion, or were you just playing?”
“If I had truly been your enemy, none of you would live through our meeting,” Loki assured him.
“Consider all that you have learnt today, Stark. Do not forget that just because you prefer to use earth as your element, it is not the only one you can use. When I see you next, I expect to find you grateful for the lesson.”

He vanished. Or, more likely, cancelled his projection.

There was a minute of silence, which Bruce concluded by saying, dry as Chablis: “What a dick.”

Tony wasn’t going to cry, but it was a near thing. He sunk into the swivel chair and put his face into his hands. “I can’t protect you.” He thought he had left this kind of all-encompassing helplessness behind in Afghanistan, but here it was.

Fuck, Fury was right.

Fury was fucking right.

They were hopelessly, hopelessly outclassed.

A hand landed in his hair and tugged gently. “So,” Bruce mused, “we need powerful allies? And Loki seems to like you. Just… please, try not to needlessly provoke him?”

x

A flight to Malibu with Dummy as his co-pilot (worse than having no co-pilot at all), three sleepless nights and a drinking binge later, Tony was watching the news footage of the Avengers in action. The camera kept following Scarlet around, and someone should probably suggest to that girl that short skirts weren’t the ideal uniform.

Not Tony’s concern, though. Steve was the Head Dad in Charge of that sitcom family.

After a couple of minutes it became apparent that the substitutes had the situation well in hand, and Iron Man definitely wasn’t needed. Bruce was standing in the background next to Barnes, and they watched as Steve coached the new kids through taking down a mutant teenager that was more freaked out by what was going on than anyone around him.

No nefarious intentions anywhere, just a young man whose DNA had fucked him over in a very public way. Good thing Iron Man wasn’t there, or they would have been scraping the X-boy from the sidewalk.

Tony even liked the tree growing in the centre of the Time Square. It looked very… natural.

“Is it true that you have been in negotiations with the Army to get the Iron Patriot as a replacement for your team?” a reporter asked Steve once the situation was fully under control and the mutant kid received some Xanax.

“I think you’re under a wrong impression,” Steve said kindly. “Tony Stark is not someone you can replace.”

“Fuck you, Steve,” Tony grumbled and motioned JARVIS to turn off the feed.

JARVIS ignored him.

“His removal from—”

“Iron Man has not been removed from the team,” Steve cut in with a stony face that made the guy
with the microphone stagger backwards in primal fear. “Due to health reasons, Tony was forced to reduce his incredibly hectic schedule. We rely on him, and he has never let us down-”

“Blatant lie,” said Tony, turning his back to the screen and rummaging through his workbench for something to do.

“-despite great personal losses. I respect Tony Stark, and I respect his decisions, and I will not allow him to be slandered within my earshot.”

This was bullshit. Tony grabbed a half-empty oilcan and called Dummy over. The maintenance was premature, but he needed something to do with his hands.

Steve was supposed to hate him. Tony had gone to uncomfortably cruel lengths to make it so. Damn the punk for being smarter than that. Or Barnes for convincing him. Or, come to think of it, Pepper for threatening him into obeying the PR people.

“He’s right,” Tony offered after the news switched to the topic of presidential election, and JARVIS finally turned off the feed. “Health reasons. I’m off my rocker. No psych eval would ever clear me.”

“You did not resign from your membership of the Avengers in deference to your health, sir.” JARVIS knew well that there was little Tony cared about less. “You resigned due to hubris.”

And vainglory and addiction and incurable loneliness caused by complete lack of understanding from his friends and a creeping suspicion that he was bringing danger into their lives. More danger. Unnecessary danger.

He still didn’t know enough. The teaser of Loki’s information dump told him about as much as Leeloo found out toward the end of the Fifth Element. Tony was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Loki appeared, as if he had been listening in on Tony’s internal monologue.

Tony didn’t acknowledge him. He was presently preoccupied with Dummy’s joints.

Loki took a seat and conjured a glass of mead. Discounting Earth alcohol, which probably had little to no effect on him, Tony had never seen him drink.

“Do you acknowledge how gentle was the lesson I taught you?”

Tony gritted his teeth. There was a shouting rant brewing in the back of his mind, one that he had prepared and perfected when he couldn’t sleep at night, each word as sharp as a razor blade, and yet that was a child’s response to punishment. He knew. He knew that instead of temporarily switching him off, Loki could have killed Bruce, or driven him insane or enslaved him. Wiped his mind, or even ‘only’ his memory – there were so many strings and each led somewhere and each could be strummed, pulled, tied or ripped.

Tony had been taught lessons through people’s death in the past.

“Yes,” he said. He acknowledged it. Even if he didn’t understand the why.

Loki sighed. He closed his eyes for a moment, looking tired, exasperated… undeniably parental.

“The world out there is more dangerous than I ever imagined, isn’t it,” Tony guessed.
Loki nodded.

Tony had been seven and hiding a bruise after a kick to the ribs, because he had judged the rescue of his remote-controlled car worth it, when Maria explained to him what ‘tough love’ meant. Back then, little Tony wanted to believe that she wasn’t full of shit, although with time it turned out that no matter how hard you pretended, and no matter how rich the guy was, you couldn’t wish the PTSD out of the war veteran.

So, he thought, this was what Maria’s words meant. Not Howard’s complete lack of inhibition or kindness – or, occasionally, humanity – in private. No. The self-control needed to inflict an exactly measured amount of pain without inflicting actual damage, onto someone about whom you cared, with the genuine intention to teach them, if they weren’t willing to learn without it.

Tony laughed, mirthless. It figured that Loki would turn out to be a good fatherly figure.

“Do you remember,” Loki spoke, eyes meeting Tony’s in an unprecedentedly direct mind-to-mind connection, “what you learnt when I kept you hidden from the sight of those who would be too hasty in their judgment of you?”

Entirely too much about winter, Tony thought glibly, and then sought for a better analogy. “That the real world looks more like Diablo than Blizzard had any clue of?”

“Through the prism of the cultural experience of a minority on a small and barely significant world.”

Let it not be said that Anthony Stark was unteachable. “Alright, fine. Postulate. Magic is a branch of science.” At some point he had to stop protesting, because he had sounded to himself like a time traveler from the Middle Ages insisting that Starkphones were the Devil’s work, (though, to be fair, if they were talking about iPhones, that would still be subject to debate).

“Must you stall, Stark? Your mind is clear now, and acute enough to arrive at the conclusion by itself. Are you truly so lazy that you would come to me begging for hints?”

Tony faux-innocently opened his palms and smiled the way that used to drive Pepper to smoking. Menthol cigarettes, actually. “You came to me, Papa Smurf.”

“Stark.”

Loki looked in fact so terribly exhausted that Tony felt marginally guilty for being unable to face his issues with any kind of decorum. Without Pepper or Rhodey or Happy or JARVIS to play mediator for him, he was pretty hopeless in direct interpersonal communication. He wasn’t even doing it on purpose. Not always, anyway.

He tried. He honestly did, the way he had when Bruce was in danger, the same way he had when the world had been attacked or when Pepper had gone to steal Obi’s shit without knowing that Obi was a murderer. The serious way.

“So,” he deduced like Sherlock, “Erskine stumbled over some magical crap, and was smart enough to keep that to himself, which is why no one ever made another drummer boy like Rogers.” Sorry, Green Bean. “Good thinking there.” Honestly, he swore, sorry like Hammer after his big Vanko-supplied Hammeroid illusion popped. Just ouch. “And, you’ve sort-of given me the tools to go for it, seeing as Asgardly speaking I’m a genius toddler and you’re curious if I’m going to electrocute myself when you let me play in the lab. Only I personally think one supersoldier is more than this world can take – it’s certainly more than I feel like I should have to deal with.”
Loki waited out the rant; moreover, he listened to the entirety of it, not just to the words and the sentences, but also the spaces between the lines and occasionally to the actual font. He seemed to have heard the very 5-D construction of associations inside Tony’s head, just adding superfluous support to the assumption of his telepathic abilities.

“Cannon fodder has its function,” remarked the ex-Prince of the Golden Realm. “Where would Asgard be without Thor and his ilk?”

This was probably the main reason for the ‘ex’ in front of his title – if one dug deep enough to unearth any kind of actual motive beneath the political maneuvering.

Tony risked a smirk. “Down the fucking drain. You’d get bored of ruling after two weeks.”

“Possibly.” Loki leaned forward and steepled his fingers under his chin. His jade-green eyes bore into Tony with the absolutely clear message of ‘am trying to convey something really fucking important here’. “Or I would find myself capable of patience for the sake of delayed gratification.”

Tony nodded. He replayed the statement in his mind, first as he heard it, then as it was probably meant to be heard, and then just guessing at how it was meant.

Loki was intentionally making it easy.

“Oh! You want me to make myself immortal! I can do that.”

He heard what he had just said.

The realization finally dawned.

“Oh. I can do that.”

Loki closed his eyes again, this time with a self-satisfied smile. “With what you have accomplished while limited by Midgardian understanding of the universe, I do not doubt it.”

“Your people have golden apples of some sort?” Tony fished, pulling up a new file to start Project… huh… say… Project: Bad Wolf. He liked the second-hand relation to Fenrir, and through there to Loki.

One of these days he might ask about Loki’s actual kids. After he had updated his Will.

Loki didn’t even bother with opening his eyes; besides, his moue was telling enough. “The Allfather’s people have golden apples, because they are as a rule incapable of independent thinking. Their skulls are full of boar fat swimming in mead. I have my own ways of perseverance. It is not a difficult task. You shall undoubtedly manage.”

*Bad Wolf*, Tony repeated to himself. Better than War Pig. It lacked the gravitas of the ‘Merchant of Death’, but also escaped the vainglory of the ‘Oncoming Storm’. It didn’t sound much like him, but the goal here was the opposite – to soak in more of the world, rather than saturate the world with himself. He was sure he could do both once he hit his stride, but for now he decided to cut himself at least as much slack as Loki cut him.

He suspected that the god was in fact sleeping. He didn’t try to check – not suicidal at the moment, apparently – and he didn’t mind. JARVIS wasn’t going to rat them out, either.

Loki could catch at least seventeen and half of his forty winks down here.
The blank file taunted him. Eager to put in something to mar that empty expanse of screen, Tony wrote down an older idea that just returned to him: ‘If you want to help an Iron Man, give him an apple; if you want to save him, teach him to garden.’

That’s what he had thought. Had this been obvious already then, and he had just been too oblivious, like he sometimes tended to be – thanks, everybody, for pointing that out, time and time again – or was it Tony’s own brand of futurism manifesting? Prophetic talent or Asimovesque high-math pattern prediction?

Whichever was the case, he wasn’t founding a Foundation. That shit was so creepy it made Big Brother seem just a tad overbearing.
The Hundredth Part

Engineering preliminary steps toward immortality in the end resembled nothing as much as a
semestral project.

Tony felt ridiculous doing it.

He had been tooling up his avatar for decades, so why should he be returning to the boring upper
levels of the dungeon and taking out the minions’ minions’ minions for a measly one exp point a
slaying, when there were bosses out there? Secret locations waiting to be unlocked, treasure troves
to plunder?

In the beginning, when Tony was young, he didn’t know the rules, but he learnt along the way, and
the more he learnt the more he felt like he was just playing an MMORPG, plugging in online
whenever he absolutely had to, to make sure the other players didn’t take his stocks or his bases or
whatever kind of game it was they all took so fucking seriously. Tony didn’t get it.

Or no, fine, he got it, intellectually, but he didn’t feel it. He never felt like he was really a part of
that virtual world, and it caused a weird cognitive dissonance when he reminded himself that the
world wasn’t virtual. And, if he really thought about it, what was the damn difference?

He still couldn’t see why he was obligated to take anything seriously.

He knew it was ‘bad’ when people were killed, but with the exception of about a dozen
individuals, people weren’t anything but avatars. Usernames connected to stats. Whatever.

Ask him if he cared.

One of the things Happy had just accepted about Tony but never understood was that for him, life
was like a game. Life was a game. Rhodey was trying, to this day, to dissuade Tony from that point
of view. Pepper had run in horror when the true implication of that weltanschauung caught up with
her.

Loki agreed with Tony, and then added: ‘but, look here, there’s the source code and there are the
programmers; just because you started out within the game does not mean you have to remained
confined there’. There were no words for how hard he had to try to keep from making a Matrix
reference.

“I,” he said to JARVIS once the fight became too much for him, “am the Chosen One.”

There was the anticipated protracted while of reverent silence.

Then JARVIS politely inquired: “Shall a new pair of sunglasses suffice, sir, or do you require a
lightsaber in addition?”

Tony predicted that when the Avengers called him in for help, it would be either to fight another
battle against invading aliens, or because Richards failed to manage his pal Victor.

He was right.

There was something surreal about fighting the Ontvættir again. He would have suspected Loki, if
not for the far-too-neat symmetry of the story. Loki liked to start his stories with a bang and end them with a nuclear explosion.

“What is the situation, Captain?” demanded an uncharacteristically nervous Coulson.

“I’m – grounded – sir!” Steve exclaimed in between laborious breaths.

“Looks like a nuclear explosion might still be on the cards, Jay.” Tonny mentioned within the privacy of his HUD. “Keep a tab on the phone lines, would you? Last time Fury resoundingly failed to stop the strike.”

“The situation is not quite as dire yet, sir,” JARVIS assured him. “If there are news, you will be the second one to know.”

“I trust you, Marvin.”

“Not that you have a choice,” JARVIS pointed out and, okay, he was right, but he didn’t have to put it like that. In the end there wasn’t time to banter about it, because the next thing out of Jay’s speaker turned out to be: “Seed located. Er.”

“Problem?” Tony didn’t like the sound of ‘er’. His A.I. made frankly incredible progress in expressing himself, and this sound was entirely new. It wasn’t a good thing to stumble over in the middle of a battle which, as opposed to most Avengers’ battles, wasn’t as good as won before the Iron Man had entered it.

Tony hated this kind of battles the most.

“Secondary location,” JARVIS said.

The map on the HUD zoomed out, and another spot started pulsing red.

“Tertiary location.” There was a hopeful protracted while, and then JARVIS admitted: “Quaternary and quinary locations.”

“Five überweapons of doom?” Tony inquired, trying for flippant, and perhaps almost succeeding except for how his pulse went through the damn proverbial roof and there was possibly some shortness of breath.

He was prepared to deal with one world-ending device disguised as something he especially didn’t want to kill. He couldn’t think of what it would be now that the fuckers had wised up to the fact that even toddlers could get summarily executed on this sociopathic planet, and he didn’t exactly want to find out.

But… five apocalyptic anti-boggarts.

He was impressed. And pissed.

“Patch me into the Avengers’ line, Jaybird. Much as I’d like to, I’m not seeing a way out of this one without playing nice.”

“While I do that, sir,” JARVIS suggested as if the action wasn’t a matter of a fraction of a second for him, “why don’t you check if your new-found skill set may be of any help?”

“Testing a brand new ability mid-battle?” Tony wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. Sure, against a run-of-the-mill enemy he absolutely would do that, screw the risks, but, as previously stated, this
was kind of an existential war. He was in serious danger of dying here. And, oh, so were a lot of other people.

“Sometimes you have to run before you walk,” Jay mis-quoted in return, cold like liquid nitrogen – and, wow, Tony knew he was an ass, but sometimes he took the cake (and did something nasty to the uneaten part before he returned it to the actual birthday-person).

Stopping to sightsee in the midst of fighting, while Captain America ran around organizing his rag-tag group of people whose staying power was in their lack of confrontationality, seemed in theory like a good way of getting killed. In practice, JARVIS took over the Iron Man armor and did whatever seemed prudent to keep Tony alive, while Tony left the usual four dimensions behind.

Tony disengaged the HUD. Total darkness closed in on him. His balance centre went haywire, body thrown in unexpected ways as JARVIS controlled the armor through a fight-and-flight sequence yet faster than Tony usually managed himself.

One good thing about having added an editor to the program of his mind was that he could now make his brain project an overlay on what his eyes could have been seeing if there wasn’t the facial plate in the way. As a visual thinker, Tony needed to see.

The inside of his head resembled an Escher sculpture inside a Klein bottle.

The outside of his head looked like a map of all public transport everywhere in the world on the outside of the Klein bottle.

This had the very interesting effect of collating the inside and the outside of Tony’s head and giving him a terrible headache, but it also let him see straight through the Ontvættir’s shifting abilities to the reality of their beings and their mutual interconnections.

“Ooh.”

“Sir?” JARVIS inquired with concern. “Your vital signs remain within safe limits-”

“Send all five locations to Coulson and give him emphatic advice to make the hits simultaneous. We don’t want the evil fairies to figure out something is up before it’s too late to do anything about it. Don’t let them see us coming.” He blinked. It was still dark inside the armor. But the lightbulb lit up. “No, actually, let them see us coming. Heh.”

JARVIS’ voice became a much needed anchor. “As you wish, sir. Shall I reactivate the HUD?”

“No. Get me to the spot with the minimal sum of distances to those five locations.” He felt the acceleration in his bones. He focused on refining his strategy, since ripping through a web of causality seemed like a quantum nightmare he didn’t have the time to chew through right now.

“The Avengers and SHIELD are ready to strike, sir,” JARVIS reported. “You are in the location you specified.”

“Good job,” Tony absently replied.

“What is your plan?”

Tony called on Extremis. It was never meant to be utilized this way; he felt like he was trying to split an atom with a hammer. Still, Loki had taught him how to do this, and Tony had taken the lesson to heart.
“You know that part in Harry Potter when they defeat the boggart by turning it into something funny and then laughing at it?” If JARVIS responded, Tony was too far beyond the frontier of the traditional spacetime to hear him. “Yeah, that wouldn’t work – let’s not do that. I prefer not to horribly die. But, the fuckers are reverse boggarts. They turn into people we don’t want to hurt to make hurting them hurt us.”

That was their main strategy. Aside from starting their invasion in Washington, D.C., but Tony actually understood the logic behind that. The most wide-spread Midgardian propaganda (read cinematography) made it look like the U.S. of A were the rulers of the planet, and the President was the ruler of the U.S. of A. So, logically, if an invading race intended to get rid of what they perceived as the supreme ruler of Midgard, they would start by mounting an attack on the White House.

Not that Tony minded. It cut down on his commute to work.

“So,” he said, turning slowly around and gathering all the threads he thought would be useful, “methinks they won’t know what to do with being really, properly terrified.”

He gripped the strings tightly in his metaphysical hands and took off flying straight upwards.

\[x\]

With the exceptions of Cartoon Network and the weather channel, the footage of an alien army fleeing in terror before small groups of unitarded agents and scattered individual Avengers was everywhere.

Tony hadn’t watched it yet, though he quite looked forward to it. Later. Once his headache abated enough that he wouldn’t be longingly thinking of a railroad spike through his temple. JARVIS kept him appraised of what was happening in a soft, careful voice.

“Captain Rogers demanded to see you. When I informed him you were presently indisposed he redoubled his efforts; I am afraid I had to temporarily ban him from your floor. Your recovery would not benefit from his specific brand of well-meaning vehemence.”

Tony huffed. And regretted it afterwards.

“I would have allowed Dr Banner to see you, but he has fallen asleep immediately after the Ontvættir’s retreat and is still at the SHIELD field hospital. He has not sustained any injuries; according to the attending physician’s report, his state is exacerbated by chronic exhaustion and malnutrition.”

Fuck, Tony thought. He couldn’t do anything about that now, but he would. Later. Apparently Bruce was just as bad at taking care of himself as Tony, when there was no one to point out his hypocrisy.

“Agents Romanov and Barton are en route to New Mexico as the guard detail for Dr Foster. Agent Coulson gave the order to contact Asgard and request Thor’s expedient return, after Agent Barton postulated that the attack was facilitated by Loki-”

“Bullshit!” Tony exclaimed, and then groaned. Damn it, magic hurt.

“Such faith,” the green fairy said dryly.

Tony relaxed before he realized it was happening. His headache didn’t immediately disappear, but the healing effects of Loki’s astral juice were apparent within seconds.
“Y’ello,” Tony deadpanned.

“Disgraceful. Robbed of articulation by mere discomfort, Stark?”

For a very short time, while parts of his brain that weren’t normally activated still felt the strain of recent overuse, Tony could sense Loki’s use of magic. Not the general energy that permeated him (now he came to realize that his original fantasy-novel-like name ‘magic’ for it had been grossly erroneous), but the directed, intentional manipulation of spacetime.

Then the healing progressed further, and Tony lost the sensitivity entirely.

He wasn’t complaining. It was well worth it for the lack of agony accompanying his slightest motions.

“That’s better,” he muttered, and very grudgingly pulled himself up to a sitting position and opened his eyes.

The near-opaque window let the absolute minimum of sunlight into his bedroom, but Loki still managed to look dramatically backlit.

“Faith,” Tony repeated. “Faith’s bullshit. It’s never not misplaced.” The best you could try to believe in was god – who was the greatest politician ever, with all the promises he made and nigh-on zero actual actions, with all the money he accumulated and power he delegated into people’s hands – or Steve Rogers – who had belittled Tony and then punched him in the face. And walked all over Barnes like Barnes was his personal doormat. And tried the same with Tony.

Not that Tony was bitter, or anything.

Loki’s grin was mercury (hah – Quicksilver, get it?) quick.

Tony rubbed his temples. His head wasn’t aching anymore, but he still didn’t feel entirely up to going mind to mind with the greatest self-proclaimed asshole in the nine realms. “If an alien invasion is your idea of a lesson, we should move the campus further away from civilians.”

“I do not control the Ontvættir,” Loki dismissed, as though that somehow signified his complete innocence. For once, Tony honestly wasn’t sure whether the bag of cats’ brain had orchestrated the entire event, or if Tony was given an unlikely ideal opportunity to try out new mojo in a real-life situation.

Why control the odious little shape-shifting troglodytes when just nudging them in the desired direction accomplishes the goal – and does it so much more cleanly?

Tony scowled, only mildly upset about the wrinkles this was going to give him (he was going to work on the Philosopher’s Stone, and show the middle finger to all those Middle Ages alchemists who failed at creating it). “Is this the way you talk circles around Thor? I’d have thought that after two thousand years, it would have gotten boring.”

“I would have expected that after two millennia, the hopeless oaf would have learnt something,” Loki returned.

“Maybe he did,” Tony suggested, “and just fakes the obliviousness, because he knows that otherwise you’d have stepped up the game?” That actually sounded like something Tony would have done, if not for the fact that he physically couldn’t not brag when he was winning. In fact, he bragged even when he was losing. Bragging was his default setting.
“Would that it were so,” Loki sighed.

Tony perhaps could have censored himself, but he absolutely deserved this. He deserved a damn party for how he had dealt with the latest batch of evil aliens. He felt like he had properly avenged himself for the bullshit in the intervening months since the first attack – he hadn’t realized that there was something weighing on him, but he noticed after that weight was lifted.

In the spirit of celebration, he inquired: “So, Your Chaotic Neutrality… from your point of view, is Thor essentially in love with a chicken?”

Loki didn’t reply, but there was a tension around the corners of him mouth like he was too amused to not let it on. Tony read that as ‘not really, but the idea is too funny to deny it’.

Besides, if a chicken had a mind like Jane Foster’s, Tony would be perfectly fine with crushing on it himself.

“Yes,” Loki said, schooling his features into something resembling a serious expression, “although, to be fair, the chicken is actually more intelligent than he, so I am not certain who is more deserving of pity in that situation.”

“Apparently, love doesn’t know race,” Tony replied flippantly, mind already elsewhere.

Loki scoffed. “I have lived for what must seem a very long time to you, Tony Stark, and I have yet to see proof that ‘love’ is any more viable a concept than ‘faith’. Either is but the likeable public face of a deadly nest of self-defeating emotion.”

Tony blinked, briefly startled out of his contemplation.

Loki looked… well, desolate seemed about as descriptive as anything. He looked a lot more like a human being than he ever did before – even if there still was the amoeba of flavored power hanging in the atmosphere around him.

Within a blink all the emotion was gone, and the Loki left behind might as well have been hewn out of marble.

Tony didn’t expect that a creature as accomplished as the alleged God of Chaos would have let himself be witnessed in a vulnerable moment, unless that had been the point.

“You have done well yesterday,” Loki said kindly. “Watching you was most gratifying.”

“Drink?” Tony inquired. He was unsurprised, but his triumph definitely deserved a toast or two.

“Perhaps next time,” Loki allowed, and took his magical leave.

Tony toasted himself and included JARVIS, who bore it in silent – and somewhat disapproving – complicity. Feeling the comfortable burn in his esophagus, Tony thought about Aesir and Jotnar and… humans? mortals? Men? what was the actual PC term? Thor mostly went with ‘Midgardians’, but there seemed to be something demeaning about everyone else having their realm called after them, while Tony’s people were called after their realm.

Young race, comparatively speaking, but he was a shining example of how much the faux-parental patronization wouldn’t appeal to the human arrogance in the long run.

And they weren’t all defenseless poultry raised for a slaughter (Loki had acknowledged Tony as an infant predator, after all). Jane Foster might have been a lower life form compared to Thor, but by
Midgardian standards she was also a mage.

And so was Bruce. Bruce, who had gone further than any other ‘Midgardian mage’ on the road to immortality.

Tony wasn’t officially allowed to invite any of his friends to the cool magic-science study group, but he was absolutely going to do it anyway. It turned out that some things were more important than others, and seeing their relative value wasn’t always easy. Besides, Tony was still working on unearthing all the hidden meanings of Loki’s brutal lesson in Hulk-stealing, and he chose to believe that one of *el maestro*’s less obvious meanings was an implicit confirmation that Bumblebee was a part of whatever the Hell was going on at the intergalactic level of shenanigans.

Maybe the end of the world. They could be the four riders of Apocalypse. Tony’d be War, that was a given; Bruce could take Famine, starved for affection as he *still* was.

Unfortunately, Pestilence was already claimed by Barton, so… tough luck.

In other news, it turned out that Ragnarök was the more likely version of the end of the world after all. Tony felt like quoting Frost.

Loki would *adore* that guy.

x

“Tony!” Steve exclaimed as soon as Tony stepped foot into the penthouse. He stood and moved forward, and halted just short of punching distance, reluctant to watch Tony flinch away from him again, presumably.

This, Tony mused, was familiar. This was also the very reason why he had moved to Malibu. He would have happily remained ensconced there if not for the D.C. trouble, and his subsequent acute need for recuperation, which wouldn’t have been aided by a needlessly long flight.

JARVIS had made an executive decision and landed Tony at the Tower, which Tony didn’t mind in principle, but he would have appreciated the option of breakfast without being judged.

“Hey, Capsicle.” Tony made an effort to remind everyone present that he was an asshole.

‘Everyone present’ consisted of Steve and Barnes and Bruce with a book that looked like an American classic, and if Tony knew anything about literature, it was that American classics were the kind of things you read if you wanted to be depressed.

They were just a step down from Russian classics, which he supposed were reserved for the suicidal.

“Hey Sarge. No hard feelings about guilt-tripping your best guy?”

Whatever ‘best guy’ meant in the forties’ argot. Tony rooted for them, he really did, and if he had been rooting for them even a little less he would have teased them both mercilessly. He wasn’t actually sure about anything and, oddly, he didn’t much care, as long as Steve was so quick to grin these days and Barnes sassed anyone and everyone with about as much fuck given about consequences as Tony had ever mustered.

Barnes scowled at Tony, tacitly promising mild bodily harm but not death; Tony took that to mean that they were within a shouting distance of cool.
“Stark, next time you try to lecture anyone about friendship, I’m going to laugh into your face and ask how much Miss Potts makes in a year.”

That sounded fair. Tony sealed the promise with a kiss pressed to his fingers and flung in Barnes’ direction.

Barnes caught that kiss and stashed it in the back-pocket of his cargo pants.

It left Tony feeling a little gooey in the vicinity of his arc reactor. Such a cute kid, that old-timer, and already telling his younger elder betters to kiss his ass without saying a word.

“Bucky…” sighed Steve.

“Go back to your robot flick.” Barnes poked the meat of Rogers’ shoulder, and Captain America obediently returned to his abandoned laptop and headphones.

Tony recognized the part of the movie, and flinched. He hated that violence on artificial intelligence was somehow acceptable to the human mind – that it was easy and non-traumatizing to watch wholesale destruction of sentient life-forms as long as they were silicon-based.

When someone did it to people, everyone went out of their mind. Doing it to animals was punishable by prison. But robots? The audience laughed. Steve was just sitting there and happily watching it happen right in front of him.

Different standards for sanity, Tony supposed.

Like when Loki killed a few hundred people, and Odin frowned at him the way a human would frown at a little kid pulling the wings off flies.

“Are you okay?” asked Bruce.

Tony shook his head. Then he realized that he probably should have lied – that had been a prime opportunity for some handy white lie, he didn’t need – or want – Bruce to hover and nag at him. He was fine.

His extraterrestrial master had healed him.

Fuck. Speaking of uncomfortable realizations-

“That’s it.” Bruce set his depressing choice of literature onto the coffee table and stood. “You’re really not okay. I’m not leaving you alone in this state.”

“If you don’t want him to move back to Malibu,” Barnes said, looking upward through his lashes, like the cutest sniper-killer in the history of the planet, “you should ask him very nicely.” He had the ‘0-800 call me’ voice down pat.

Bruce blinked at him, all innocent confusion, and nudged Tony into the elevator.

“When’s the last time you went out?” he asked, as if he hadn’t noticed Barnes opening his piehole.

“Yesterday,” Tony replied dryly. “There was an invasion, and I know you guys are the experts but I felt like maybe I could contribu-”

“Yes, Tony,” Bruce sighed and moved as far away as the confined place allowed him to. He leant back against the wall. “You saved us. Again.” His eyes were trained on Tony, and communicated very pointedly how much he was unwilling to let it go. “You seem to make a habit of it.”
“I was just doing my civic duty,” Tony said a little too quickly.

Bruce ignored the very neat if veracity-challenged explanation in favor of smiling at Tony. “Any chance you’ll share details on the how?”

“No,” Tony blurted.

Bruce stared at him.

Tony reconsidered. Or, rather, remembered that he had already decided and, seeing as he could apparently be completely chickenshit about some decisions, he had been determined to wait for Bruce to ask – he would have preferred some strongly worded demands to which he could ‘cave’, but Bruce wasn’t the type to demand, much less with any strength to the words. This was probably as forward as Bruce would get, barring Code Green.

“Yes,” Tony said.

Bruce nodded. “Let’s go get cheeseburgers and talk about magic.”

One of the reasons why Tony didn’t go out anymore – aside from the fact that he really didn’t feel like it, unless it was to find a loose girl who wanted to spend a night in his hotel room – was that nearly every time he went out, something like this happened.

He looked at the golden-horned person standing in front of him, sneering imperiously around themselves at the shrieking and running New Yorkers who had previously enjoyed their late lunches in the tranquility of Central Park. He stuck the remaining piece of his cheeseburger into his mouth whole and chewed obnoxiously while he walked the four steps to the nearest bin and disposed of the oily wrapping paper. Bruce, who stood warily next to him, handed him a napkin without taking eyes of the angry alien deity.

“Did he forbid you from talking about it?” Bruce inquired.

That might have made sense. Tony was the type to disregard rules, whether they were made by Pepper Potts, Captain America or Loki the Prince of Chaotic Destruction.

“No, not really,” said Tony.

Bruce tensed. Apparently, up until now his exasperation with Tony getting him into trouble had been winning over the anxiety of the situation.

Tony took that personally. It was one thing to use Bruce for an abject lesson in the private of the well-reinforced Avengers Tower, and a whole other to make him anxious among countless panicking civilians.

Tony finished wiping his hands and threw out the mangled napkin.

Then he slowly sauntered forward, putting on an expression of reluctant deference. “Hey, you,” he said, because every stage magician needed his distraction. “Long time no see. I thought after yesterday we’d have a couple days to take a breather, but, no, here you are, Your Worshipfullness, ready to cause mayhem.” Now for the last nail in the coffin. “They do run quite like headless chickens, eh?” He gestured toward the dregs of the picnickers and joggers that were rapidly disappearing in distance.
Tony used the moment when his opponent glanced to where Tony was pointing, grabbed a fistful of long hair through the illusion of the horned helmet and pulled with his entire body. He was only vaguely aware of Bruce’s exclamation from behind; no time, he had to react fast, too fast, whoever this was it was a mage, and mages were twisty, slippery fuckers.

He pulled both himself and the fucker to the ground and used his grip on the hair to smash the fucker’s head into the asphalt. Twice.

“We’re going to die,” Bruce concluded, moving just out of reach, and looking ready to hulk out.

Tony knelt, one knee planted firmly in the fucker’s spine. “You’ve got five seconds to tell me before I smash your skull to bits on this asphalt. Or smash the asphalt with your skull; I’ll enjoy it either way.” He tried to engage Extremis, to at least see the strings, figure out what he was dealing with. “And I learnt smashing from the Hulk, so you bet your Asgardian ass is going to feel it.” Presumably Asgardian. If this was a Frost Giant, Tony would have been flash-frozen already. “Who are you, and where’s the Lokester?”

“Oh,” said Bruce.

The fucker groaned, but still had the temerity to go for injured pride, despite the suddenly blonde hair and female-ish constitution. “Have you gone senile, Stark? It is I – Loki-”

“That wasn’t even a good try.” Tony smashed the fucker’s head against the path. He absolutely wouldn’t have dared to do anything like this to Loki. Aside from that, he wouldn’t have been able to even if he had another suicidal moment and tried. “Want another go? You still seem somewhat coherent, though that’s going to be one Hell of a shiner.”

“Her name is Amora,” said Loki, turning up out of nowhere, although he had the presence of mind to do it on the opposite side of the path from Bruce. “She is… shall we say… envious. Covetous to the point of murder.”

“Of?” inquired Tony and Bruce in science-brotherly harmony.

“The reputation of the greatest mage on Asgard…” Loki paused, grimacing, “and the great treasures of Thor’s loins.”

There were so many comebacks, and Tony didn’t want to be too tacky, but before he could figure out which of the gems of witty repartee he would show off, there was Bruce with his sardonic: “…the rest of Thor optional?”

Loki looked at Bruce. Judged him. Judged him worthy. “Quite so. Queen Frigga was very clear about the distance Amora is obliged to keep from Thor and Thor’s cohorts at all times. I dare say she is in violation of this order. Oh, what a pity.”

Good, Tony decided. So Bruce as an example of ludicrously advanced science was after all invited to play around with ludicrously advanced science.

“Does that mean I can crack her skull a bit more?” asked Tony. He wanted to offer Bruce the skull-caving part, but had a suspicion that this would not be received in the same spirit it would have been offered.

“You are not usually so bloodthirsty,” observed Loki.

“She came in here pretending to be you.” And oh. Tony hadn’t known that he could feel so personally offended by someone impersonating his friendly neighborhood extraterrestrial
megalomaniac.

“Not well, I see.”

“She got me,” muttered Bruce.

But Bruce hadn’t actually met Loki in private for longer than a minute or so, and he had been pretty out of it then.

“I didn’t fall for it for a second.”

“Intriguing.” Loki’s eyes bore into Tony. “I would be curious as to how you knew – later, when strange ears do not listen to us speak. It is a matter of great interest to me, since Amora once managed to impersonate me even to the Honorable Ve.”

On no, no way. If Loki didn’t know about the addiction, Tony wasn’t telling him. Tony wasn’t telling anyone (else, although, to be fair, JARVIS had figured it out on his own). It was a weakness the size of the Pacific Ocean, and Tony had learnt that lesson with the Mandarin.

“You want to take her to Asgard?” Tony asked, climbing off of the woman, presuming that Loki would keep her magically under control. “Give her up for identity theft and Thor-stalking?”

“Be worth a feather in the cap,” Bruce muttered. “Not that you suffer any paucity of those, I imagine.”

Loki momentarily looked surprised, and then waved his hand. “I shall carry the tale of your glorious victory to the meadhalls. I am sure Thor will gleefully boast of the fighting prowess of his friend the Iron Man. Your fame shall spread like fire.” He grinned and disappeared, and so did the prone witch.

“Did he plan this whole… thing?” inquired Bruce.

“Rule of thumb says yes.”

Bruce sighed. “Is this the Jotnar idea of apprenticeship?”

“Worse than that,” Tony grumbled unhappily. The entire uplifting feeling of the illicit cheeseburger was gone. “He promised he’d tell everyone about this, and that means-”

“You’ll be hip-deep in attacking alien wizards and witches all the time,” Bruce filled in, mind catching up with Tony’s.

“He’s forcing me into the wider universe kicking and screaming. Though, maybe not so much of the screaming, lately.”

There were distant sounds of sirens. A news channel chopper flew overhead.

Tony and Bruce watched it pass vainly searching for the commotion.

“I once thought my life was insane,” Bruce remarked.

Tony knowingly nodded. “So did I. And then this happened.” He spread his hands.

Bruce hugged him, quick and tight, and then stood by Tony’s side, prepared to face the oncoming wave of law enforcement and journalists with him.
Tony listened to Pepper expressing her concern for him with tired tolerance, aided by a recreational glass of martini. He was steeling himself to listen to her expressing her concern for the S.I. next, when she surprised him.

“Is there a point to telling you how this will affect our stocks?”

Tony gave this serious thought. “Do you need me to sign anything?”

Pepper sighed. “I’ll have the folder couriered. To Malibu?”

“I’m staying here at least until tomorrow. JARVIS will remind me to do it before I leave.”

“And will you actually do it?” Pepper asked, drawing on a decade of experience with him.

Tony shrugged to himself and gulped down the olive. “If I don’t, tell Jay which shoes to buy.” It was a gesture utterly empty of meaning at this point, although, to be fair, Tony went for it only when Pepper tried to emotionally extort him again. He had had enough of that sort of manipulation while they were a couple.

Pepper must have wised up to the meaning of an offer of shoes; her breath hitched on the other side of the phone line and, after a while of quiet, she said tightly: “I’m glad you are okay, Tony. Bye.” Then she hung up.

“Have time for me now?” Rhodey asked with just a little sarcasm.

Tony looked back to the screen. He had tried to make Star-Wars-like holograms for videocalls, but the 3-D rendering from 2-D picture ate processing power in ridiculous amounts, and looking half-through a 2-D holo-picture of Rhodey’s pretty face was okay for a two minute call, but for any longer than that it made Tony feel like he was talking to a ghost, and he especially didn’t want his oldest friend to witness one of his little breaks from reality.

“I haven’t been ignoring you, platypus. The boss called. She’s pissed-”

“She’s always pissed at you-”

“You know, I noticed that. What do you think it’s-”

“You keep breaking our hearts, Tones,” Rhodey said so seriously that Tony swallowed his next interruption. “It’s not criticism. You think my Mama doesn’t worry I’ll get my fool ass blown up flying around inside a tin can? Half her grey hair’s on my conscience. But we still do it, because if we don’t-”

“Who will?”

Rhodey nodded. “Pepper can’t deal with it. I know a lot of people like that. Every soldier has a family, and I’ve got men here that haven’t talked to theirs in years – been asked not to come back home, not to call. Some people just…”

Tony nodded.

It was easier to think of it like this – that he and Pepper were somehow innately incompatible – than to remember their relationship as a series of thoughtless decisions and self-defensive douchbaggery.
“Thanks, Rhodes. You’re a peach.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Rhody grinned, short but wide, and for a couple of seconds he looked just like his old self from the times of Reagan’s second election and the Internet Engineering Task Force. “Look, man, I know I should be around more and it sucks that I can’t, but… if I hear one day that you got your white ass killed, I will tell the story of Thanksgiving of ‘86 as your eulogy.”

Tony paled.

Rhody grinned. “You’ve been warned. Better not die before me then, eh?”

“If you get yourself killed, I’ll tell the story of your second flight.”

Rhody looked to be on the verge of protesting, but the ‘you wouldn’t’ stuck in his throat as he realized that Tony most certainly would have.

“Deal,” Rhody said eventually. “Neither of us is allowed to die. Now, tell me about what the fuck was that bullshit today.”

Tony waved his hand.

“Don’t even try, man. I’ve got reports of a Loki sighting in Central Park, but negligible damages, no casualties and only light injuries.” Civilians shouldn’t be allowed to run. They tended to damage themselves. “I’ve heard you’re buddy-buddy with the God of Lies, but I thought there had to be more to it. You wouldn’t really make friends with the asswipe that tried to invade Earth, right?”

Rhody saw the point. “Fuck it, of course you would. Of course. So, what? Are you taking over the world and splitting it? Is that what’s happening?”

Tony stared at him.

Rhody saw the point. “Fuck it, of course you would. Of course. So, what? Are you taking over the world and splitting it? Is that what’s happening?”

Tony stared some more. Letting a panicky Rhody speculate had always been funny, and it only took Tony a slightly superhuman effort to keep his mouth shut this long.

“You said you didn’t want to take over the world. Come on, Tones, don’t do this to me. I don’t want to fight you. It was bad enough the first time. Just tell me it’s a ploy. It’s not really Loki, is it? It’s an LMD. You’re pranking everyone.”

Tony grinned. “No, but that’s a great idea. I’ll get right on it. And close your mouth, sugarlips, or a desert bug will fly in it.”

“Tony, what the fuck happened in Central Park? Scratch that, what the fuck happened around you since I last saw you?”

Tony didn’t feel like rehashing that much processed shit; maybe someday later he would have JARVIS compile a bare-bones report and let Rhody read it, but he didn’t think there was a lot to tell. Most of it was hazy with too much booze and too little Loki-ooze and – shit, what the hell had just dripped out of his sick, sick brain? He suspiciously squinted at the glass in his hand.

The threads momentarily blinked into visibility. They looked untampered. And martini didn’t usually do this to him… He went to mix himself another one. He deserved it.

“So, Bruce decided that stopping aliens didn’t count as excursion and dragged me out for cheeseburgers…” He went on to retell what he considered the salient parts of his morning, using his friend as a sounding board for figuring out the implications. He still didn’t have it all straight in
his head.

He had done something monumentally stupid, on instinct, and it had worked out. Up until recently he had only ever used Extremis to about one percent of its potential. Now it was maybe six – seven? – percent.

At some point Rhodey clenched his fists so hard that Tony was seriously concerned for the man’s immediate surroundings. “You’re not seeing the point, Tony.” He pressed the knuckles of his right fist to the bridge of his nose. “That woman – Amora… Tony, you dispatched her without armor. Without any firepower at all. Just walked out to her, and took her out.”

“She didn’t expect me,” Tony said, trying to pretend like that was a valid argument.

Rhodey wasn’t amused. “She is an Asgardian. A mage. Arguably a god.”

“Sent to me on purpose,” Tony returned. “Probably neutered to make sure a complete novice could get the jump on her.” Tony hadn’t actually used any magic beyond some basic passive shielding and maybe a very, very basic version of the Confundus (so named in honour of J. K. Rowling). It was stuff he had figured out while Loki had him interred in the Ice Villa of Eternal Winter, and hadn’t used afterwards because… frankly, because he was a scientist and not a wizard and it had taken him too long to internalize that they could be the same thing.

Now he just used Harry Potter references as a form of passive aggressive protest against living in fantasy as opposed to the sci-fi he was promised.

Rhodey was still glaring at him. “It’s as if you want me to pretend you didn’t tangle with her without the suit like she was not even a threat-”

“I was with Bruce. Bruce kicked Loki’s ass.” Granted, Loki let him, but that was semantics and didn’t have any place in this conversation. Mostly due to being a sound counter-argument.

The glibness didn’t have the desired effect of making Rhodey leave it. In fact, it had the very opposite effect. Cupcake’s face clouded over, and those dreaded lines around his mouth made their appearance. “Tony, stop protesting that you’re getting drafted to a higher league.”

Tony tried and failed to cross his arms in front of his chest due to the martini glass getting in his way. He pouted. “Am not.”

“Tony.”

“Nope. Staying here.” He knew exactly where Rhodey’s mind had taken him; Tony’s mind had taken Tony to the exact same place, back when he had asked Steve for a divorce. He wasn’t regretting his decision in hindsight – a little bit of personal space had done him a world of good, and it also seemed to help the new kids when he kept his distance, owing to the confusion of too many murdered parents. In any case, just because Iron Man wasn’t an Avenger anymore didn’t mean he wasn’t going to work to defend his home planet alongside the Avengers.

And they knew it now. Believed it, too, maybe.

“Besides,” Tony added, recalling the method used to convince him that emigrating into another realm wasn’t going to happen anytime soon, “he said I was staying.”

“He said,” Rhodey repeated in the ‘yeah, right’ tone. Someone stopped next to him, mostly out of Tony’s sight, and handed him a memo. Rhodey read it and nodded, scowl deepening.
This was probably the last semi-relaxed videocall for a while.

Tony waited until Rhodey’s minion left the cubicle that served as a field office for an Air Force Colonel in some backwater probably Middle East country (JARVIS would have tracked the call, but Tony had crossed his heart and promised he wouldn’t try and find out, barring extreme circumstances – JARVIS was Tony’s most favorite loophole ever).

“Eh, maybe not exactly said,” Tony admitted once Rhodey gave him the all-clear. “Maybe… pointed out with threat of excessive damage to the Avengers. That I’m staying.” Fuck, that wasn’t a good way to put it; Rhodey knew him too well. On the other hand, Tony had a very, very slight tendency to be overdramatic on occasion, so he could maybe play it off. “I’m like… the smalltown kid next door who actually studies at Caltech, but does it through online courses.”

The lines around Rhodey’s eyes and mouth didn’t smooth out entirely, but there was a hint of unwilling fondness (like a sickness for which there was a treatment but not a cure) etched somewhere in them. The guy was an absolute marshmallow. “I’m pretty sure you can’t do that.”

Tony grinned and drained his glass. “I wouldn’t know, I went to MIT. Which you should remember, chocolate chip; you were there with me. Is it all the parties? I knew I shouldn’t have let you drink that much.”

Rhodey groaned. They both remembered the parties. And they both remember who was the actual underage drunk between the two of them.

Tony sent him a kiss.

Rhodey laughed against his will.
There’s this thing, a thing about people like Howard Stark and Pepper Potts and Clint Barton – aside from them being brilliant and famous and super-successful and regarded as heroes by the public – and that thing was that they crept under your skin and holed up there and then disappointed you, and no matter how hard you tried to convince yourself and how hard you tried to pretend to the world at large that you didn’t care anymore, you did.

Tony could repeat to himself until the space mouse ate the whole cheesy Moon that Barton wasn’t his friend, it still felt horrible to stand face to face with him in the centre of the living room and listen to him talk.

“Guess it comes from being born with a silver spoon up your ass, Stark. You never learnt to give a damn about anything you had.”

This was rich, coming from someone who had been living on Tony’s dime for, whoa, a couple of years now.

“Natasha said Fury shouldn’t let you join the team, because you’re volatile, and unreliable, and didn’t care about anything but yourself.”

This, Tony mused, was probably one of the reasons why Barton chose to have this conversation in relative privacy, as opposed to waiting for witnesses to compound what he expected to be Tony’s humiliation. Barton wasn’t that guy. He wasn’t doing this to humiliate Tony. He was just lashing out, out of genuine resentment.

Tony thought about pointing out all the arrows he had made for Barton. He knew what the guy would answer, though, and he didn’t particularly want to listen to how it was his ego and his narcissism that wouldn’t allow him to let SHIELD kick out his ex-teammates.

“I didn’t care in the beginning, and then – I knew there was more to you. You did some good shit. I don’t get where it’s all got this fucked up.”

Tony considered if maybe this was another test. He had enough practice by now that he could activate the thread overlay – as he had begun to call it in his head and his notes (encrypted to Hell and back) – at a moment’s notice. Barton was damaged on the ‘magical’ level. Natasha’s recalibration had ripped a couple of things to dislodge the knots, and the subsequent healing Barton had received wasn’t supplied by an experienced magic-user.

Tony could sort of see what was wrong, even if at his level he couldn’t have done anything about it.

“-ny! Stark! C’mon, Stark, what the fuck-”
“Sir,” said JARVIS.

Tony blinked. He ripped his arms out of Barton’s hands and backed away, momentarily disoriented. Ugh, shaking someone out of mage-sight was about as bad as waking a sleepwalker.

“That’s it,” snapped Barton. “You need help. I don’t care what Natasha says-”

“You don’t?” Natasha inquired.

She was suddenly there, but Tony realized that he wasn’t startled. He had known.

Just as he was just realizing that Thor was nearby. Not in the Tower itself, but gods had big presences unless they cared to hide them. And Thor never cared.

Thor was a thunderstorm everywhere in his vicinity; sometimes literal, mostly just metaphorical. The sky outside was blue-grey, with a few scattered white clouds passing by overhead.

“You know what I meant,” Barton said to his spy-twin, and then they stared into each other’s eyes and communicated by dilating and contracting their pupils, or whatever it was they used in lieu of actual telepathy.

“Leave Tony be,” said Natasha.

“You can’t order me-”

“Leave Stark be,” said the Coulson-stein Monster.

Even his presence didn’t surprise Tony, although he had definitely not heard the man come in. Huh, of all the altered states of mind he had experienced, using magic wasn’t the freakiest, but not by far.

Barton gave his favorite zombie a betrayed look.

“My threats don’t affect him anymore,” the stiff announced stiffly. As though he was above admitting that Tony had the full right to feel slighted by the dead-Coulson double-cross. If not on his own behalf, then on Pepper’s.

“He’s under Loki’s control,” Barton protested. “We can’t actually let him-”

“Loki’s influence,” amended Natasha. “We know about it. He was never hiding it.”

“I don’t get it!” Barton snapped and, oh, were his eyes sort of glistening? This was weird. “Is Stark a traitor or a victim? Should we lock him up or save him?”

Natasha put an arm around her spy-twin’s shoulders, and that was weird, too.

Not to speak about Agent Zombie’s soft look in their direction. Tony hadn’t known the guy was physically capable of a soft look.

“Tebye nada astavit’ yivo v pakoye, yastrebyonok.”

The translation of ‘you should leave him alone, little hawk’ appeared on the tablet in Tony’s hand, which he had been using to run a simulation, but pretty much forgotten about when Barton accosted him.

“I’m going back to Malibu, anyway,” Tony said.
“In that case, Mr Stark,” Coulson spoke up, “you should be aware that SHIELD keeps continuously revising our contingency plans in case you choose to change your affiliation.”

Tony, who had stopped taking SHIELD seriously after Steve and Natasha and Sam Wilson blew it up and subsequently broke the internet, didn’t say anything. He walked past the Zombie like it wasn’t there, like there still was just a hole left after a deceased friend rather than another next to it from the stab of betrayal.

He paused before entering the elevator and said what little he felt confident saying, both emotionally and linguistically: “Da svidanya, Natasha.”

“Sir,” JARVIS spoke mid-flight, “you have a call from Sergeant Barnes.”

Tony frowned. “Emergency?”

“No.” Jay didn’t say anything else, but he only ever tended to be secretive over things that were either harmful to Tony (in which case he would have send Barnes straight to Hell and never told Tony about the call) or funny.

“Pick up?”

“Stark, were you in such a hurry to get out of here that you couldn’t stop to say goodbye?” demanded Barnes.

Tony grinned. “Steve pouting?”

“Cow eyes like you told him the Moon landing was fake.”

“Shh,” Tony insisted. “Not so loud. He wasn’t supposed to figure that one out-”

“What?” There were some furious whispers and a familiar snort in the background, and then Barnes came back with: “You bastard, I almost believed you.”

Tony stopped biting his lip and laughed. “Look, Anakin, if Steve pines for little awesome me too much, teach him how to use a phone. I tried, but it takes more than I could give to drill something so complicated into his head-”

“Goddamnit, Tony, I know how to use a phone-” yelled Captain America from the background.

“Finally,” Tony snarked. “Congratulations. Now gimme Bee. I know he’s there. No one else snorts that cute-”

“We’re commiserating about our landlord being an asshole,” replied Barnes.

“I think that’s practically a prerequisite for a landlord,” quipped Bruce in the process of accepting the phone from Barnes, as if putting Tony on speaker wasn’t an option.

So much for the WWII veterans knowing how to use a phone.

“Hey, Bee. Missing me? Already?”

“I think if I did, I’ve just stopped.”

Tony grinned. “If commiserating with the retirement home gets old-”
“You’re a dick, Stark!” and “Tony!” echoed from the background, because supersoldiers had enhanced hearing.

“-you’ve got your own room at Malibu. Jay?”

“Standing invitation, Dr Banner,” confirmed JARVIS.

“And the landlord’s much less of an asshole,” Tony pointed out.

Bruce sighed. He seemed like he was trying to refuse the offer, but all that came out of his mouth was: “Take care of yourself, Tony. Jarvis, please keep me in the loop, okay?”

“I’ll be calling you every night,” Tony promised mock-sweetly. “Put an hour aside. Daily. I’ll be all yours. It’ll be all ‘no, you hang up first, boo’.”

Bruce sighed and hung up.


Before its crash into the ocean, the Malibu Villa used to be a mixture of modern architectural trends, professional interior design, and the kind of facilities Tony needed to comfortably work on his stuff.

It had been rebuilt afterwards as something different.

Tony didn’t give a fuck about alleged modern trends. He set the fucking trends, anyway.

He had simply given JARVIS complete freedom in building his new home. This was way before things came to pass that decided Tony would move in with his artificial baby again. Being welcome there was the best feeling he had experienced in a long while. It ached in his chest, and made it a little hard to breathe (made his sight go a little out of focus, too), but in a good way.

The red and gold sunset shone through the floor-to-ceiling windows, hit the planes of cut glass, and reflected and refracted in mind-bending ways. It was like walking into a CGI set design.

Tony was a little overwhelmed. “Genie, genie…” Tony muttered to himself. “That time I saved the world…”

“Which of the times?” asked JARVIS.

The plea was supposed to continue with the request for Obliviation, but Tony found that he didn’t want to complete it.

The green fairy, damn him, had been right.

“The very sunset bends to your will and dons your colors,” said Loki.

Spare a single miniscule thought for the devil, and he shall appear, Tony mused. He didn’t want to look away from the light, though.

He would have to raise anti-Apparition wards around the estate. He didn’t actually mind Loki coming in (and honestly doubted that he could keep the god out, no matter how hard he tried – he hadn’t forgotten about him eating lightning), but Loki had more or less promised to send all kind of rabble this way so Tony would have someone to practice his defensive skills on.

“Jay’s will,” Tony amended. “I had nothing to do with this. It’s all him.”
“Appreciation of aesthetics,” Loki said with undisguised fascination.

Tony shrugged. He would have been smug, except that was genuinely all JARVIS. The only thing he as a programmer could boast was giving his program the ability to recognize its own snags and design or request specific alterations. Frankly, Tony hadn’t known that aesthetics were important – except when choosing a girl to fuck that night, and not even always then, depending on factors like his level of inebriation or her experience and enthusiasm, but they weren’t discussing his forays into BDSM now – much less vital for a sentient being.

“Did you know we’d die of depression without the ability to like stuff?” he inquired idly.

Loki inclined his head ever-so-slightly, and that could have been an acknowledgment of new information as easily as it might have been confirmation that he had indeed known. Either way, Tony had obviously won major points through helping JARVIS make himself.

“It is far too easy to be overwhelmed with despair even when surrounded by beauty.”

“I prefer to see my creation as a meagre expression of gratitude for a gift of freedom,” said JARVIS.

The conversation had turned far too serious for Tony’s stomach. He went for the bar and surveyed the selection of beverages.

“It must be a wondrous thing, freedom,” said Loki. “Not being bound by your parentage, by your class or the color of your skin or by whom you prefer to take to bed. Being allowed to not only feel anger but also to express it.”

“And the same with affection,” returned the A.I. “It is not quite the ideal of having a recourse against every injustice, and yet I dare say it is closer than we have ever come before.”

“A realm without an absolute power to rule it.” Loki stepped into the light. Bathed in red and gold, he turned to the west and squinted against the sun. “A never-ending, vain struggle for peace.”

“That’s why Odin sucks so much at ruling,” Tony mentioned, deciding on scotch, for which Loki had shown middling preference in the past. He poured two glasses and handed one over to his (or rather, Jay’s) uninvited guest. “Too much perspective that leads directly to too much compartmentalization. His kingdom works like a clockwork; it’s efficient and it’s totally stagnant. If there’s ever an anomaly, the power differential’s so great that he squashes the divergent with ridiculous overkill.” Tony sipped. Good stuff. Then again, all of his stuff was good. “He’s like that guy who’s been playing World of Warcraft since two thousand four with the same character, and by now he’s leveled up to… uh… ubergod?”

Holding lightning in his bare hands, Jesus Homer Christ. Tony wouldn’t get over that one anytime soon. Loki had known exactly what he was doing in showing off that particular trick. Mindfuck.

Tony shrugged and looked at his self-appointed mentor. “No point to playing with him. Even less point to playing against him.”

Loki tacitly drank. It was as good as an acquiescence.

“You staying for dinner?”

Perhaps another time. Since Thor’s currently on Midgard, I am needed to keep his nascent court from disintegrating in his absence. I cannot afford but short trips to your realm. However, I am aware of how personally young ones take perceived neglect, thus I travelled here to reassure you.”
Tony rolled his eyes. Then he reconsidered. If Loki disappeared for a few weeks without any sort of forewarning, Tony would have felt abandoned.

As it was, he would probably feel pretty bad, anyway. Withdrawal sucked.

“Since I am already here, and you do not appear overly busy-” He made a complicated gesture with both hands. The floor in front of him seemed to turn liquid and get sucked down a drain, but a moment later the funnel reversed direction, and regurgitated a polar fox that sat on its hunches and stared up at Loki with mild curiosity.

The god pointed two fingers at the animal and spoke: “I bind you to walk before Stark and rub everything of metal that stands in his way with your tail.”

Tony activated threads overlay just in time to watch something hopelessly complicated happen. The result looked like a quantum dream-catcher in at least four dimensions.

His face must have done something truly hilarious, since Loki snickered.

Then the god briefly put a hand on top of Tony’s head, and returned his glass at the same time, confusing Tony’s reactions for just long enough to get away with it without any retaliation.

“Once you break the enchantment,” said the mage, “she may be a worthy companion. Until that time, do enjoy electricity, Iron Man.”

And he vanished.

Tony looked down. The fox wasn’t there anymore. It was across the room, sniffing at things and trailing its tail over everything metallic. Considering JARVIS’ taste, there was a lot of those things, from table legs to handles to the cover panels of holo-projectors.

“Don’t say anything, Jarvis. Just… don’t.”

x

Later that night Tony muted Chappie in the middle, downed the rest of his scotch, and sank deeper into his armchair that was mostly made of insulating materials.

“So, just, let me put this into perspective.” His fingers drummed against the edge of the arc reactor. “Half a year ago, Loki was topping the list of wanted criminals on Earth, and a recently released ex-con on Asgard. Today he is persona non grata on Earth unless representing an alien government in an official capacity, and the chief advisor of the crown prince of Asgard. He also has me eating out of his hand, not in the least because I am physically addicted to his very presence.”

“It does sound accurate, sir,” agreed JARVIS. “May I point out that he also has your advocacy? If not in public, then amongst the Avengers he is not universally regarded as an enemy chiefly due to your unexpectedly vocal support.”

Tony groaned. Something ran over his feet and he flinched, before remembering the newest addition to the household. “Thank fuck for Barton, baby. At least that acerbic ass will remain rational.”

The Voice of Reason must have decided that diplomacy was the better part of valor, and refused to comment. Instead, he returned to the previous topic. “You are, however, correct in the observation that Mr Loki needed less than a year to jump from a prominent public enemy to a grudgingly accepted ally.”
“And it only took one failed Ontvaettir incursion.”

“In fact, sir,” JARVIS protested, “you will find that it took two failed Ontvaettir incursions.”

“Jay…” Tony took a deep, deep breath. “I feel like we still have a lot to learn.”

End Notes

Warnings: unabashed slashy vibe (although no actual slash), violence, gore, disinheriance, child death, child murder, mindfuck, angst, depression, suicidal ideation, rational contemplation of suicide, PTSD, gratuitous profanity (by which I mean, littered by F-bombs like they’re going out of style), alcoholism, substance abuse, unreliable narrator, brainwashing, horror, misuse of religious themes, twisting of religious themes, implication of non-con in general, mention of historical genocide, serious contemplation of committing genocide, racism and specieism, generally offensive behaviour, playing fast and loose with canon

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