Just a Rose on a Star

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Just a Rose on a Star

by road_of_ruin

Summary

It wouldn't be the first time Tony Stark flirted with death, but no matter what the others said, reading stories to the quarantined God of Mischief was definitely one of his better ideas.

Notes

So I started this story last year and it stands as the first FrostIron I've ever done. It's my take on this pair in a realistic light, with plenty of humor and feels thrown in.

Comments and commentary are most appreciated.
"The little prince sat down on a rock and looked up into the sky. 
'I wonder,' he said, 'if the stars are lit up so that each of us can find his own, someday. Look at my 
planet-it's just overhead. But so far away!' 
'It's lovely,' the snake said. 'What have you come to earth for?' 
'I'm having difficulties with a flower,' the little prince said. 
'Ah!' said the snake. 
And they were both silent." 
~ The Little Prince

There was a skip to Tony's step he hadn't felt in a long time. Perhaps it was the way no one in 
SHIELD had yet to notice he was there, waltzing easily towards the quarantine section of the 
building, cocky grin in place. It was early morning, so early few people would even be considering 
being awake, but this was just sad. The security detail needed some work and he made sure to say so 
to the first camera he saw, obnoxiously saluting with his curled up newspaper as he passed, knowing 
the footage would get to Fury eventually if the man wasn't already watching.

A few guards littered the long hallway, but none made a move to stop him, too busy doing 
convincing impressions of statues as he walked past. He frowned at a few of them, made faces at 
others, but none deterred him, nor tried to impede his progress towards the newest resident of the 
prison. He snorted at them, turning on his heel to send a pointed look at another camera before 
rounding the corner.

He would catch hell for this, he knew, but that was part of the fun.

"Good morning," Tony smiled at the first agent he saw, flashing his teeth and being louder than was 
probably necessary. Not that he cared much. He was having a good day, and considering the hour, it 
hadn't even technically started yet. The young man just blinked at him, rolled his eyes, and punched 
in a code. Tony frowned in response, wondering at the cold reaction, before carelessly shrugging and 
sauntering through the entrance once the heavy metal door had rolled away with a trembling moan. 
"Thanks very much."

The rational part of his brain (the part that sounded suspiciously like Jarvis), once again asked him 
just what the hell he was doing. He just chuckled to himself and fixed his grip on the paper, adjusted 
his sweater, not knowing the answer. He was dying, but unlike the last time, when everything was a 
time-bomb and the days were numbered, he knew what it took to save his own life. It was just a 
matter of playing a waiting game, a game that had grown far too boring to play alone.

His teammates would never understand this newest escapade. If worse came to worse, Tony 
supposed he could blame Doom and Hulk, who had completely destroyed his workshop in their 
latest battle and, therefore, his means of recreating an arc reactor that wouldn't slowly poison him to 
death. None of the Avengers had walked away from that one unscathed, though Tony had taken the 
main brunt of it. While blocking an attack on Steve, Tony's left wrist had nearly been snapped in two 
by a glancing blow from Hulk's fist, the force of it sending him careening towards the nearest wall, 
his entire right side smashing hard into the unforgiving concrete. Three broken ribs and a fractured 
scapula, a ruined suit, and a heavily damaged arc reactor later, he'd been officially out for the count, 
unable to do anything but watch as Steve was thrown from a window, Doom was ripped to shreds in 
Hulk's rage, and Thor's shoulder dislocated as he forced Hulk to the floor, pinning him down by
placing Mjölnir on his back.

His equipment had been flung in all directions as make-shift weapons, his delicate instruments ripped
to shreds as bodies plowed into them. Even Jarvis had not been spared as his main drive was torn
from the ceiling by wicked fury and Doombot hands. Only his suits remained as testament to all the
hard work he'd just lost.

Tony had been forced to spend two weeks at the hospital. With the state of his home, Pepper had
only been able to bring him an older palladium core, one she'd kept for reasons he hadn't bothered to
listen to. Forced to put the poisonous arc reactor in, he'd been strictly ordered by his beloved assistant
to stop with all Iron Man shenanigans for the time being, lest another repeat of his last brush with
death happen. He had to hand it to Steve, the old soldier had a damn good poker face, not saying a
word as Tony asked him to lock up his suits. Asking to be pulled off the fight roster indefinitely after
his recovery date had made Steve's eyebrows do that concerned furrow-thing that Tony always felt
guilty for causing, but he hadn't questioned the reasons behind the request. Tony knew he owed him
a good case of scotch for that, even if Steve used the time off to get Tony to do normal things like eat
and sleep.

In those weeks of his hospital rest, his entire workshop had been cleaned out, no scrap of metal left
behind. It had been worst-case scenario from the start. With no access to a power source or a metal
piece to harness the new element, Tony was stuck with the palladium core, his days numbered like
the old nightmare of years ago. Only worse. His body had no resistance to the palladium this time
around, and the toxicity levels grew steadily daily, rising up four percent every two days, even when
he remained in bed, staring miserably at the ceiling.

He only had three weeks of total physical and mental clarity left in him, tops, as long as the
palladium continued to ooze into his blood at a steady rate. It was unlikely at best as the more poison
that piled up, the more quickly it would become toxic, so he prepared for only about two weeks
before he kicked the bucket, two weeks to gain the parts he needed and create a new core. He had to
re-establish Jarvis's connection with Stark Tower too, at some point. But he was always one to tempt
fate and so had no qualms to ordering the required equipment from overseas instead of hashing out
what he needed from what was left of his workshop. Besides, the only available place at the
Avengers Headquarters was lacking in element-harnessing materials since it had more or less been
converted to Bruce's permanent lab and home, and he definitely wouldn't be the one to upset the
stability and peace the troubled doctor had finally found. He'd put himself on a tight timeline that
could either lead to the end or another last minute save and no one but Pepper knew about it. It was
just his nature, flirting with death, and she knew it. And because she was always right, it meant no
having parties, no Iron Man suits, no fun for Tony Stark. All the money in the world and he'd
already started to go mad with boredom.

And then, two days ago, Steve had approached him with news that Thor had brought Loki back to
earth, after his long stint in prison on Asgard. Placed into quarantine in the newly built SHIELD base
the moment he took a step on their soil, the God of Mischief had been placed into a clear cell much
like the one that had held him before, cut off completely from his brother. SHIELD was doing
nothing less than tempting Loki into escaping, dangling a carrot Loki had, so far, refused to
acknowledge, and the Avengers' once enemy had been quiet the first week of his stay, offering
nothing, asking nothing, just staring intently at the cameras watching his every move. Upon hearing
the news, a strange resolve had grown in his head, perhaps because of his impending death, perhaps
because of his boredom, but it became an itch he couldn't ignore. A chance to bug the fallen
trickster? The opportunity had been far too good for Tony to pass up.

Thus, here he was, waving a newspaper cheerfully at the God of Mischief himself, who looked over
at him from the far corner, rather unimpressed.
"I suppose I should be more surprised than I am to see you, Stark," Loki said dryly. Tony stopped just short of two feet from the glass of his cage and he laughed as the god frowned. "Come to gloat, I suspect?"

"Well aren't you just a bundle of sunshine," he shook his head, still grinning. "Perhaps I just wanted to grace you with my pretty face."

"I shall try to withhold my excitement," Loki stated, rolling his eyes. The dry humor was refreshing and almost nostalgic to hear, and Tony couldn't help another laugh while he carefully settled on the walkway, back pressed to the railing. Loki's green eyes narrowed in suspicion as he got himself comfortable, jaw tense and clenched in irritation. Oh yes, this had definitely been a great fucking idea, sore muscles and bones notwithstanding. He'd just have to remember to bring a chair next time.

"You look pretty rough," Tony assessed, giving Loki a quick glance-over. He seemed thinner without all that flashy armor and paler too, his skin an almost unhealthy white, the color shocking against the modest green tunic he was wearing. His black hair fell in lank tendrils about his face and over his neck, dark circles under his eyes and in the shadows of his gaunt cheekbones. There was gray and purple bruising around his neck and wrists, hidden with an easy tilt of the head or movement of cloth. Everything about Loki seemed less than before, more contained, but somehow still wild and untamable. His very presence filled the entire glass cage like a looming fog, the air about him charged with magic and suppressed emotion. Tony clicked his tongue and opened the newspaper to hide his interest, trying not to look entertained. "How long has it been? Two years?"

"One year, three-hundred fifty-seven days, and this morning I presume, in regards to your calendar." Loki didn't miss a beat did he? Tony smirked into his paper, whistling loudly.

"And he counted the days. Aw, did you miss me that much?" He could see the outrage blooming red over Loki's face before he stubbornly turned away. It was a little strange that the bait hadn't been bitten immediately, considering it was Loki, but Tony let it slide, allowing the god to take his time. At least he didn't look like the walking dead anymore.

"Quite the contrary," Loki sighed after a moment, the ghost of a smile thin on his lips. "I so enjoyed not having to listen to your mindless chatter, I counted the days we were apart with utter delight."

A hint of wit was better than none. Tony winked at him before turning the page, shuffling it with as much noise he could muster. Loki's attention fixated onto the paper and he slowly wandered away from his corner, steps quiet and labored as though each stretch of his legs was an effort. He headed towards Tony until he stood an equal distance away from the glass between them, arms crossing over his chest while his eyes raked over the front page.

"You heard about your buddy Doom?" Tony asked him, stretching his neck to peer at where a picture of Stark Tower and Hulk hanging out of one of the windows was featured, the shredded Von Doom in his fist. Loki scowled at the use of buddy but shrugged a shoulder in response, not caring.

"Victor was foolish enough to enrage the creature," Loki said simply, as though discussing the weather. "That it managed to bring about his end was inevitable."

Tony had expected as much. Loki could be a cold bastard if he wanted to, and clearly there was no sense of camaraderie between the god and villain. He returned to the paper, checking out the comic section with feigned concentration.

"Did my brother send you?" Loki asked him after a few moments, and when Tony turned to him, he was surprised to see the taller man laying on his back, legs bent upward, long fingers tapping
mindless rhythms on his ribs, regarding the ceiling with a bored expression. So, Thor had managed to get back to brother status huh? Just what the hell had happened to them in Asgard?

From the angle he was in, Tony had a better view of the bruises smeared around Loki's throat. Perhaps he'd been forced to wear a collar and shackles? The thought was both oddly pleasing and unsettling all at once. Tony forced his eyes to Loki's face.

"No he didn't, though I'm sure he is sorry about, you know… getting you arrested and thrown in a cage," he pointed out, glancing about the cube. There was a small flap on the right side of the front panel that hadn't been there before. It looked like a mail slot. "He didn't think SHIELD would be so mean to you."

Loki actually scoffed at that, an airy sound that almost held a laugh. "Thor is naïve. He simply cannot fathom that others do not share his devotion and… faith, in me."

"Give the guy a break would you?" Tony huffed, shaking his head, trying to look condescending even as he grinned like an idiot when Loki slowly shifted to meet his gaze. "Not his fault he loves your unforgiving ass."

Loki didn't look like he had any way to respond to that, blinking rapidly as his brows furrowed. "… my backside has nothing to do-" then he paused, catching the meaning, and scowled at Tony when he snorted.

"Charming," Loki spat, determinedly staring back up at the ceiling.

"It's been known to happen," Tony smiled. He folded up the paper and tossed it aside, eyeing the other curiously. If Loki noticed his stare and didn't acknowledge it, his eyes closing as his legs slid out, one by one, until he was fully spread out on the floor. A pained breath left him at the movement, but otherwise he remained still, lost in some place Tony couldn't see.

"…why are you here Stark?" Loki asked and his voice was low this time, tired and rough and grainy with ghosts. "Surely it was not to irritate me into speaking?"

"Why? Is it working?"

Loki's glare was hot enough to burn through his sweater, but Tony just smirked, glad to have hit a nerve. Irritating a god wasn't something one could do everyday, especially not a god who had caused so much trouble as this one.

"Stark," the other breathed, but there was no heat in it, just an exhaustion that told Tony he was quickly tiring of their conversation.

"Do I need a reason to see you?" Tony smoothed over, wrapping his arms around his knees. "How do you know I'm not here because I just want to be? Maybe I had nothing better to do. Maybe I wanted to see you. For no reason at all." Again, he had reduced Loki to silence. That had to be a new record or something. Emerald eyes dark with pain and something haunted soaked him in, gauging the truth of his statement, mulling over his words, sharp with contemplation. "Or maybe I really did just want to grace you with my pretty face. I mean come on… after two years, you gotta be deprived."

And finally a laugh. It was nothing more than a few sharp puffs of air, but the smile that accompanied the sound was lopsided and lit up Loki's face, if just for a moment. His eyes glinted in the white light, skin crinkling above his cheeks. It was the first glimpse of the old, eerily cheerful Loki he had been once, and Tony couldn't help but feel a little proud for bringing a bit of sunlight
over the shadows of his skin.

"You are a strange one, Anthony Stark," Loki lauded, eyebrows quirking. "Will you ever change?"

"Nah," Tony stood, groaning loudly as he stretched his sore muscles, wincing when his bones screamed, dull pain exploding behind his eyes. Oh yes, a chair was a definite must for the next time, at least until his injuries healed. "You'd get bored."

With a smile, he gave the newspaper another good fold and slid it through the slot in the glass, giving a small salute before walking off.

"Until we meet again," he called in his best sing-song voice, waving over his shoulder. Loki didn't respond, but that was just fine.

There was always tomorrow.

"Would you mind telling me just what the hell that was in there?" Nick Fury was on him the moment the door groaned shut behind him, looking far too exhausted to be functioning so early.

"Oh, so you are awake." A quick glance at the wall showed it was almost five in the morning. Fury gave no answer but his dark eye was bright as he regarded Tony firmly, crowding him against the nearest wall.

"What?" Tony scoffed, blinking up. "Oh come on, really? It's a crime now to talk to someone?"

"It may be when that someone is Loki Laufeyson."

Tony frowned at that, rolling his eyes, and sidestepped Fury, making a beeline for the coffee machine against the opposite wall. "Hold onto your oversized pantyhose," he snarked, pouring himself a generous cup and drinking deep. "If it was really that big of a deal, then maybe your security guards should've done a better job of keeping me out." He offered a cup to Fury, but put it down as the other man scowled.

"What're you thinking Stark?"

"What am I thinking?" Tony regarded him, incredulous. "I come by to say hi to a caged super villain and suddenly I'm the one with a hidden agenda? You're the one who's all but forcing Loki to try to escape, just so you can have an excuse to exile him from earth forever. But go ahead. Tell me how I'm messed up for talking to the guy. Who knows? Maybe I can annoy him so bad he'd swear off - what do they call this? Midgard? - yeah. He'll swear off Midgard. And once again I'll be doing your job for you." Game. Set. Match.

Fury could only gape at him as he walked by, smugly taking a swig of his coffee. A furious retort was certainly on the tip of his tongue, his footsteps speeding to catch Tony, when a huge form beat him to the punch. Tony's cup went flying as a pair of crushingly strong arms enveloped him, lifting him clear off the ground and onto a bare chest. Raucous laughter reached his ears and then suddenly he was being spun, damp blonde hair whipping violently into his face.

"Thor! Thor - goddamnit... THOR!"

The thunder god only laughed harder, if that was possible, shaking Tony with the force of his mirth. He stopped spinning Tony at any rate, allowing him to gain his bearings, though breathing became difficult as Thor hugged him tightly, his body shrieking in response.
"Thor no. Bad Thor!" Tony gasped, desperate. God, it was just a little too early for this. Witty sorcerers, fine. He could handle that, no problem. Half naked, crazy thunder god warlords with baby brother complexes? No, just… no. Not without at least three drinks in him first, and that wasn't happening anytime soon. "Let Tony down. Tony wants down. Gently now, I'm delicate remember? Gently… good boy."

Thor set him down - dropped him more like, if his stinging feet were any indication - and gripped Tony's face in his large hands before he could stagger out of reach, his rough palms puckering his lips. He'd just showered by the look of him, his pants thrown on haphazardly and dangerously close to sliding off. Thor didn't seem to notice, staring down at Tony as though seeing him properly for the very first time.

"Tony Stark," he chuckled, delighted, blue eyes dancing. "How in all of Midgard did you do that?"

"How did I do what?" Tony forced out, starting to feel annoyed. He'd expected a backlash, but seriously, all he'd done was more or less pick a wit-fight with the most famous trickster on the planet and possibly the universe. All things considered, they should be questioning his stupidity and his sanity. Why was everyone starting to act like he'd performed some form of treason… or miracle?

"My brother… you made him talk," and Thor was laughing again, his whole face flashing like the sun. "Loki swore to ignore everyone until he was released, yet you, Man of Iron, not only did you get him to speak, you made him smile." So, Loki had resorted to the cold shoulder treatment on everyone huh? That's why Fury had been freaking out. What an entertaining thought. Thor pulled Tony in for another hug, scattering his thoughts, the thunder god chuckling and shaking with overwhelming happiness. Tony couldn't help but smile back, slapping Thor's shoulder awkwardly with his good hand, wincing as his injuries jolted.

"That's great big guy. Glad I could… help." It felt weird to say, since the whole visit with Loki had been entirely self-serving. And with the way Thor was looking at him like he was a god on earth made him feel like a right bastard. He glanced away, coughing into his sleeve as he was finally released and bent to retrieve his coffee cup.

"Ah, my apologies," Thor was quick to say, though with the size of that grin, he didn't look very sorry.

Tony surfed through his dressers at Headquarters, laughing in triumph when he came across two disks. He let them fall to the ground, nodding as they snapped easily into the shapes he'd expected. He grabbed his sweatshirt and slipped the disks inside the pockets, heading for bed until great inspiration struck and he hailed a limo back to Stark Tower.

He didn't get any sleep that night, but it was worth it.

"Good morning Starshine," Tony smirked as he approached the cage, box of donuts in hand, back pack slung over one shoulder. Loki slowly turned his head to acknowledge him from his spot splayed on the floor. He didn't look as though he'd moved at all, and Tony wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't. His gaze could freeze Hell but Tony just laughed at him, tilting his head when he was within a couple feet from the glass, setting down his bag. "The Earth says hello… oh, I suppose that would be Midgard huh?"

"What could you possibly want now?" Loki groaned, sighing in displeasure. "At such an unreasonable hour no less."
"It's only four you baby," Tony chuckled, wrestling with the box. He pulled out a chocolate bar donut and smiled wide. "No different from yesterday, so up and at 'em Loki. Breakfast time."

Loki eyed him like he had just slithered out of a tar pit. "I'll pass."

"No pass," Tony insisted, pressing the box to the glass. "No one says no to donuts."

"I believe I just did."

"I believe you're an ass, but that doesn't stop me from doing this." With an uncaring huff, he slid the box through the flap, smirking at the loud smack it made as it connected solidly with the floor. Loki winced at the sound, glaring at the offending object but not bothering to move to retrieve the sweet inside. Oh well, at least no one could say he didn't try to feed the captive god.

Stuffing the donut in his mouth, Tony grabbed one of the disks from his pocket and let it fall to the floor. It immediately sprang up into a small but sturdy chair and he grinned at Loki with his best, look-what-I-made-don't-be-jealous eyebrow tilt that made those sharp eyes roll. He fought the childish urge to stick his tongue out - an urge well avoided, since it would've pushed the donut out of his mouth - and slid the other disk through the flap where it too became a little seat.

"Midgard says hello so get your lazy ass up and greet the sun."

Tony settled into his chair, nodding appreciatively as he worked the donut around on his tongue. He matched Loki's gaze, leaning forward obnoxiously as he waited for Loki to get up. It took a few moments of Loki glaring at him before he seemed to realize Tony was not going to leave him be. With a pained sigh, the god eased himself upright, eyeing the chair and box with disdain. Just to irk him, Tony scooted his chair forward a bit, letting the feet scrape and screech against the floor. Then, on the final bite of his donut, he leaned back and stretched, crossing his ankles. The toes of his shoes pressed against the cage.

"Oh yeah, that's the stuff," he murmured to himself, eyes closing in bliss as he settled down deeper into the seat. A much better option that the concrete floor. He could take a nap here, it felt so nice. He heard a soft snort and the scuffling noise of the chair being cautiously situated, and peeked through an eyelid to see Loki settling himself slowly on the seat, long legs bending easily towards the glass. His boots lined the sides of Tony's like a broken picture frame.

"For one so eager to greet the morning, you seem far more interested in sleep."

The haughty tone made Tony smile, and he opened his eyes, noting with a hint of pride that Loki was carefully prodding open the donut box, as though expecting a snake or other creature to pop out.

"Don't worry, I didn't let Fury booby-trap it or anything," he assured, hooking his hands behind his head. "And I haven't slept for over twenty-four hours, thank you very much." Loki's expression pinched just slightly, but he pulled the box open without another word and slid the round, glazed donut out, gazing at it intently.

"…what is it?" Loki asked him, tone serious.

"It's the 'o' in orgasm," Tony replied, just as serious. "Sugar heaven for your mouth." Loki didn't seem so sure about that so Tony winked at him, trying for his best seductive face. He spread his hands wide. "Trust me."

And Loki took a bite.

It was amazing really, how a kick of sugar could effect someone. It had surprised Loki, completely,
and his eyes crinkled in shock, his mouth twitching. He didn't quite smile, but there was a genuine delight on his face that hadn't been there before as he ate the treat slowly, savoring every bite. Tony mentally gave himself a pat on the back. Frosted glaze donut. Unexpected success.

Not daring to ruin the priceless moment that was Loki drooling over a Krispy Kreme, Tony remained silent as possible, biting his lip to keep from laughing himself to the floor. Oh, if only he could see Thor and Fury's faces right now. They were probably spitting out popcorn in the viewing room at the sight. Snorting to himself, Tony waited as Loki sucked the last remains off his fingers, somehow making it seem elegant, before leaning forward to regard the god.

"Thor told me you'd decided to ignore everyone," Tony told him. "So why talk to me?"

Loki's lips twitched upward, something dark shining in his eyes. "Because unlike you, everyone else eventually gives up on the endeavor of getting under my skin. You however, will speak merely to hear your own voice. To not speak would be to subjugate myself to hours of your pointless babble. At least by responding I spare myself from poor conversation."

Tony's eyebrow rose at that and Loki sighed, shaking his head before Tony could go off on an ego-tangent. "We may have been enemies, but I have never doubted the expanse of your intelligence."

It was strangely touching, even though he knew it could've easily been a beautiful lie. This was the Liesmith after all. Still, Tony let his words dissolve between them and reached for his bag, grabbing the tome within. He'd spent all night searching for this book in his library, and it'd been hidden within a long forgotten corner. He smirked at the prospect of reading aloud to the unknowing God of Mischief.

"Do you recognize this?" he held up the large book, catching Loki's attention. His eyes racked over the cover, hungry intelligence and curiosity lifting the dark emerald to a far sharper hue. "The Poetic Edda?"

"These words are known to me," Loki admitted slowly, eyebrows furrowed. "But I cannot place this title."

Tony smiled wide in victory. Oh, this was going to be fun.

"This, my fine fellow, is the story of you and your brother as told by my people's ancestors." Loki's look of surprise didn't last long when he realized just what was about to happen, a dark scowl casting harsh shadows over his face as Tony thumbed through the pages, trying to find the perfect story to start with.

"So you wish to hear yourself speak after all," Loki hissed, voice flat and hitting that low pitch Tony had heard the night before. "If you'd merely wanted a chance to elevate yourself, you needn't seek out my company."

"Oh c'mon Loki," Tony rolled his eyes. "Stop being an overdramatic bastard. As much as I love my voice, I figured you had to be curious to see just what us Midgardians view the great God of Mischief as. But hey," he changed tactics, immediately pulling the book open fully on his lap, propping it up in his hands, "if you aren't interested, I can just sit here and read it to myself. Who knows, maybe I'll find something that Thor would enjoy."

Something dangerous flashed over Loki's face, a shadow as quick as a bird flying overhead, and Tony was almost sure he'd imagined it, but then Loki's chair was screeching as he scooted up an inch, gaze flaring hot. There was no denying the interest gleaming deep inside, and Tony bit the inside of his cheek to keep from sniggering.
"Read to me then Stark, if it so pleases you."

And so, with a faint smile, Tony started.

He read through the various myths of Old Norse gods, secretly eyeing Loki over the top of the book to catch any reactions the god made. Though it was gratifying to see Loki smiling bemusedly at some of the stories, Tony watched because he wanted to know which myths were actually real, which stories were part of the history Loki had desperately tried to bury. He knew that direct questions would either be ignored, shot down, or negotiated with his own personal secrets, but in this book, with the very legends of the brothers laid out, it was far easier to discover which tales were truth and which were truly fable by watching the changes that came over Loki's face.

Loki only gave a few secret stories away, one because he could not stop the smile from forming as Tony read him Þrymskviða. Tony himself had barely been able to read at all through his snickers as he read about Thor being dressed as the goddess Freyja to retrieve his stolen hammer from the Jotun Þrymr, Loki himself dressing as her handmaid. Loki had been far more effective in his disguise, and had been forced to cover for Thor because the thunder god, hands down, just made the worst woman ever.

"Are you serious?" Tony snorted, glancing at the nearest camera after he read about Loki saving Thor's ass by making excuse after excuse to cover Thor's awful lady manners, and just lost it imagining what Thor's face had to look like right then as he was, no doubt, listening in. Loki himself looked far more amused than Tony had seen on this new Loki, a glimmer of the old fun-loving, slightly manic, true God of Mischief shining through.

"I'm afraid so," was all Loki managed to get out between Tony's loud peals of laughter.

"Oh dear god, I'm never letting him live this down."

"I should pray not."

The humor turned cold once Tony turned back a few pages, stumbling upon the ending of the Lokasenna. The tension was palpable as he read about Loki's insults to the other gods, the long lists of offenses he'd racked up before Thor had been forced to intervene, chaining him to a rock while a great serpent coiled overhead, it's poison oozing and dripping down over Loki's chest, burning him like white-hot fire. Loki's silence made Tony watch him carefully, looking for any giveaway, for any twitch or glance that would prove this story was true. His gut was twisting as he studied Loki's face, but the god gave away nothing, not moving, just staring, soaking up his words.

The god's jaw was clenched tightly, hard enough his teeth had to be in agony. Every swallow was a flash of white moving on a pale throat, and if Tony looked hard enough, he could see the ghosts in Loki's eyes. His stomach dropped with the realization.

God, Thor had…

Not to say Loki didn't deserve it, because his crimes in this world had been ruthless and for the jugular each time, but being burned by poison for nearly two years under the orders of his own brother and father…

With shaking fingers, he turned the page, telling himself to forget it. He had his own demons he needed to exorcise. He was no stranger to betrayal on that personal level. He knew personally what it felt like to swallow his own emotions and bury his heart. He had no right to point fingers or judge anyone, and quickly found a more brotherly story that lifted the atmosphere out of the trench it had gotten into to a more bittersweet one. When Tony had finally exhausted himself, and he stood to go,
something unspoken in Loki's face had given him pause, and he slid the book through the flap in the glass.

"To keep you entertained," he said simply when Loki gazed at him, a strange, intense fire in his eyes, as he stood to cradle the book in his hands, his fingers tracing every curve of it. "You'll need something to fill the silence until tomorrow. I know it's a poor substitute for me, but beggars can't be choosers."

Then he packed up, and with a final wave and a promise of more donuts tomorrow, Tony turned heel and left. Loki gave no response, lost in the cover of a book with his stories, secrets graciously returned without a word. What felt like Loki's magic shadowed his every step, sweeping around his ankles. No one came to harass him as he left the cell block and only silence followed him home.

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That afternoon he found himself in Bruce's lab, pouring over recipes while the chemist readied his instruments. Tony wasn't sure what he was doing, but thanks to the destruction of his lab, Bruce didn't even think to ask. It took all day to complete and all night for Tony to find the perfect container. Why it all started to matter so much, he couldn't even begin to guess. But somehow it was important all the same.

The prospect of death felt different this time.

This time, he wasn't alone.

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End of Part One.

To be Continued…
Part 2

"It took me a long time to understand where he came from. The little prince, who asked so many questions, never seemed to hear the ones I asked him. It was things he said quite at random that, bit by bit, explained everything…
And I was proud to tell him I could fly. Then he exclaimed:
’What! You fell out of the sky?’
’Yes,” I said modestly.
’Oh! That's funny…” And the little prince broke into a lovely peal of laughter, which annoyed me a good deal. I like my misfortunes to be taken seriously. Then he added, ’So you fell out of the sky too. What planet are you from?’"
~ The Little Prince

"Rise and shine Sleeping Beauty,” Tony smirked as he walked in, chuckling when Loki shot him a dark look before glancing away, clearly intent on ignoring him. He was still sitting in the small chair, feet pressed to the glass, the Poetic Edda open in his hands. His eyes were fixated on whatever page he was reading and every so often his fingers lifted to gently caress the paper in wonderment, countless emotions flickering over his face like candlelight.

It was a cold shoulder if Tony had ever seen one but he shrugged it off, sliding the box of twin donuts through the slot for Loki to tackle at his leisure. So, ancient Norse text trumps handsome billionaire with sweets. He supposed he should be insulted, but considering it was Loki, he figured he should be flattered instead since it was his great-grandmother's book that held the god entranced.

Besides, it wasn't like the stories weren't pulling him in as well.

"Well good morning to you too," he snarked, not expecting a reply. Loki would talk if he wanted, and if not, then he could just pretend to ignore him while Tony did his best to drive him mad. Tony sat on his small chair, eyeing the book. It was an old thing, heading towards one hundred years if his math was right (which it always was). His great-grandmother had purchased it before the First World War, her love of mythology and art unparalleled in all of his family. It was well known Stark men were science bound, but they tended to fall for the artistic types, if the women they married these past three generations was any indication.

Throughout the tome, his great-grandmother had added her own drawings of mythical creatures and characters and had slid prints of professional renditions between the pages. Tony couldn't help but wonder if it was her art Loki touched with such reverence. Could he see the wars this book had survived through? Could he see what this book had seen? It was such an odd thought, but watching the god trace the edges of the tome was like watching a silent conversation between two ancient beings that had finally found each other, two old friends meeting after a long time apart. It almost
hurt to watch.

Digging through his bag, he reached for the other book from his great-grandmother's collection and the mismatched sibling of the Poetic Edda. The Prose Edda she had loved so dearly was older by at least a quarter of a century. She had gone to Iceland specifically for the special printing and had held it in the most special of regards. He knew this, because it had been in the most protected part of the library in a secret shelf he'd forgotten was there. It was all in Icelandic, the closest modern language to the fallen Old Norse, and his great-grandmother's art once again graced many of the pages. His grandmother, another talented historian, had also touched this book, painstakingly translating the words into English via a typewriter, the thicker paper carefully placed with each corresponding story. She had rebound it as well, tying it all together in a thick leather cover that was only just starting to round on the corners.

Tony was no good with books, really. He'd stopped bothering with them after college and technology had filled in the gap. Reading a jumble of words had never been appealing in the least. The past two days had yielded more reading time than he'd had in all the years since graduation. There was just something about Loki that made him turn to books for answers, that twisted his mind so desperately to the written words, as though the stories would reveal the hidden past and secrets his empty smile hid so well.

Unfair maybe, for Loki didn't ask for Tony to start reading aloud all his misfortunes, real or no, but then again, the god had but to ask for a newspaper or magazine to discover almost anything about Tony Stark he wanted. Chalk it up to curiosity, but since they were no longer spending their time trying to kill each other, a serious need to know overcame where fear and adrenaline once ruled.

Loki didn't acknowledge the book when he opened it, far too lost in the story in his own, and Tony just shrugged to himself, turning his attention to the pages. He hadn't had the chance to browse through the tome yet and he couldn't hold back the interest he felt as he thumbed through it, looking for any mention of Loki. It was a massive thing, with a prologue and three separate books with substantial amounts of chapters in each, so it took awhile. The Gylfaginning gave him his best chance, and he skimmed through it after a mention of Loki's name in the twentieth chapter, a disbelieving grin spreading on his face as he continued on.

Finally, the silence proved too much, and he couldn't stop the words from tumbling out the moment his mouth dropped open.

"You have kids?"

The effect was immediate. Loki's eyes flashed dangerously, expression severe when he locked their gazes for the first time that morning. He went white as snow, jaw tense, weary and challenging as he slowly, so very slowly, shut his book. It was like watching the hackles rise on a caged wolf, his magic spiking and sparking in the air between them. Three little words and Tony had gotten Loki into terrifying mother-bear mode, or at least that's what it looked like. He tried not to smile too wide.

"Well, that's a definite maybe."

He turned another page as nonchalantly as possible. Teasing the trickster was more entertaining than he ever thought possible, but he knew Loki would snap or shut up like a clam if pushed too far. He wanted answers, best to ease them out gently. Tony made a show of reading the pages before turning them, rustling the paper. The words were giving him the answers he sought, spinning wild tales of Loki and his children, some more tragic or heroic than others. His throat itched to read aloud just so Loki's expressions could tell him what was truth and what was tall tale. He chanced a glance at Loki to see him sitting ramrod straight, still on the defense, though his eyes were focused solely on the Prose Edda. Good. Now Tony could actually get somewhere.
"So… six kids? That must be a handful." He crossed his legs to better prop up the book, feeling for a moment like some sort of librarian therapist… wow, that just sounded weird. He smiled reassuringly before scooting closer, lifting the book high so Loki could see it better.

"You're gonna have to help me with names here," Tony told him, tapping a finger on the page. "Lessee… Fenrir, Hel and…" He blinked at the name. "Jörmung…gan…dr…?"

He looked up at Loki for some sort of affirmation and saw his expression had clouded over, tight and pained. So far, all true. He said nothing about Tony's pronunciation and, with a shrug, Tony continued on.

"Then there's Nari and Narfi and…" He flipped over a few pages, scanning quickly. "…ah, and Sle… Sleip…nir…?"

"Sleipnir," Loki whispered lowly, voice raw and grated as his gaze slowly lifted to Tony's. He looked murderous and defeated, all in the same breath, fire glinting on the edges of a snowstorm, knuckles a sickly white as he gripped the edge of the tome tightly. Tony paused at the sight, wondering for the first time if maybe he was stepping over a line he shouldn't cross, an invisible but tangible boundary on a knifepoint that could easily send them toppling over an edge he couldn't see. He waited a few breaths, weighing his options, taking in the serious unease in Loki's posture, the threatening lines of his eyes, before softening, exhaling slowly.

"You don't have to say anything you know," he reasoned, settling back into his chair. "Just know that, if you don't, I'll take everything in this as truth… which is kinda freaky, since it says you had troll babies after eating a fried heart. So, fair warning."

Okay, so maybe that last one wasn't true. It was the Poetic Edda that held that particularly gross story, but Loki seemed to have missed it during his book loving session and he looked rather appalled. Tony laughed, glad it hadn't been true. He didn't think he'd be able to look the god in the face without dying of laughter otherwise. "Yeah, that's what I thought too."

Straightening up in his chair, he turned back toward the first names, smoothing out the pages.

"Fenrir, Hel and Jörmungandr… it says here you had them with a Jotun lady? How scandalous, sleeping with the enemy race." He wagged his eyebrows over the book and Loki scowled at him, glancing away.

"She came to me as one of Asgard. I had no knowledge of her true identity, nor her true intentions."

"One night stand gone bad huh?" Tony sighed, nodding. "I can relate." Loki's smile was rather bitter but it was a smile nonetheless. He grinned back. "You got some kids out of it too. I bet that went down well."

"You could not even begin to imagine."

"Ah, don't have to," he pointed out, gesturing to the book. A soft scoff and Loki was glaring again, but there was something odd in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"So, this book can reveal to you what the Allfather has tried so hard to keep hidden out of shame?" Loki asked of him, a quiet challenge lacing his words. "With such knowledge at your fingertips, one cannot help but wonder why you are bothering to make me speak of it instead."

"Maybe I want to hear your side," Tony shot back, matching Loki's tone with a hard stare. "With such an opportunity to be heard, one would wonder why I'm not sitting here trying to shut you up."
"Why invest such interest in me Stark?" he snapped, as close to frustrated as Tony had ever seen. "What have you to gain from this endeavor? Is this all just a passing fancy to you? A delightful game to play with a fallen enemy? I do not tolerate being teased."

"I was going more for curiosity," Tony offered with a roll of his eyes.

Silence fell between them then as Loki regarded him closely, fishing for a lie. For a moment, it felt as though the god was seeing right through him. He felt an unreasonable needle prick of fear when that gaze purposely fell onto his chest where the faint glow of his arc reactor was visible. Loki seemed to be considering the offer, though Tony wondered just what he'd have to surrender in turn for the answers he sought. Slowly, Loki moved his chair closer to the glass, head tilting to take in the book more fully. It was obvious he was curious too, and considering his reaction to the first tome, perhaps more so than Tony.

"Ask your questions," he sighed finally, jaw clenching. Tony didn't need to be told twice.

"Does Fenrir really look like this?" was the first thing that left his tongue. Loki looked completely taken aback by how serious he was.

"By the Nine Stark, of all things-" but Tony turned the book and pressed it to the glass, cutting him off. He blinked for a moment, taking in the picture shoved into his face before his expression turned dark, scowl deep with fury.

"My son looks nothing like this monstrosity," Loki snarled, outraged. Tony watched in amazement at the change in him, a fire of a different magnitude lighting him up. It was something he had never seen in the God of Mischief before, an instinctive protectiveness rearing out of him like the rush of a waterfall, or an erupting volcano. Once again he looked murderous and his eyes actually flared bright with magic for a few breaths. Tony's eyebrows raised at the sight.

"Huh," he said, turning to the next picture. "How about Hel?"

Loki's reaction was much cooler as he took in the painting. "She is similar in some respects... but far more beautiful than this rendition suggests," he stated, and there was a definite pride in his voice that had not been there before. Tony tried not to wriggle too much in excitement. This new side to Loki was far more than he had bargained for.

"And Jörmungandr?"

Loki's scowl told him all he needed to know and quickly pulled the book away lest it spontaneously combusted in a fit of magician madness.

"You mortals have no appreciation for true magnificence."

"Yes we do," Tony laughed. "It's just our tastes typically don't lean towards world-crushing snakes and man-eating wolves."

"Fenrir is nothing like that," Loki was quick on the defense with what Tony could only guess was the father in him talking. "I have it on good authority he despises the taste of men."

"So he's more of a virgins-only kind of guy?"

If looks could throttle a person, Tony would be a gagging mess on the floor by now. He laughed heartily despite himself.

"God, it was a joke. A joke." When Loki's glare only intensified, he lifted his hands in surrender. "Okay fine, I get it. No bad talking the babies. Sheesh." He flipped back to the picture of Fenrir in
the book, eyeing his great-grandmother's brushstrokes. Time to find safer ground. "You say Fenrir doesn't look like this? What does he look like then?"

It took Loki a moment to answer, eyes sliding out of focus, far away. Something solemn crept into his face. "He is the purest of shadows," he whispered. "Darkest of furs that bleed into light, reflecting all the colors that find him, whether it be Asgardian gold or Jotun blue." A small smile. "And green. His eyes are green."

A heaviness hang between them and Tony's grin slipped from his face as Loki's words sank in, tinged in guilt and a heartbroken undercurrent that Tony had no name for nor knew how to respond to. This side of Loki was very different indeed and he felt thrown, tongue-tied. Something had gone unsaid and it clawed at him as he watched Loki's face change, outwardly collected though his gaze burned.

"What happened?" Tony asked and his voice felt out of place. A strange sort of static buzzed in his ears. Loki didn't even glance his way.

"The hatred I hold for my adoptive father became that of my son's, and for his intentions was bound beneath the kingdom where none can free him, lest he fulfill his destiny and slay Odin where he stands."

"…wow." Not his most eloquent, but the conversation had headed down a path he had not foreseen. So the story in the Prose Edda had been true then. Bound to a rock and left to die. He felt his stomach drop, an ache in his chest starting to throb. "And the other two?"

"Hel was given power over the nine realms, sovereign over the underworld. Jörmungandr was chained on my father's orders and swallowed by the sea."

Tony felt his mouth drop. Those stories, also true. "Holy shit." Loki looked exhausted when he turned back to him but said nothing and Tony floundered for better footing, turning pages awkwardly. "What about Nari and Narfi? It says you had them with your wife right? I had no idea you were married."

Trying to recover his humor, he blinked rapidly at the god, who chuckled without mirth. "A marriage of convenience, nothing more. Sigyn is content to hate me and I to ignore her."

"Isn't that how most marriages work?"

"In your world I suppose," Loki snorted, the shadows reforming over his eyes. "As for our sons… well, that is a particular topic you will not gain insights to from me."

Tony backed off quickly, not needing a repeat of the previous conversation. He had a sinking feeling that what he'd read earlier about the two boys was true as well, but he shook himself off. He felt sick while he shuffled forward in the book.

"Sleipnir?"

To his surprise, Loki seemed to brighten as much as deflate at the name, a strange sort of softness easing over his features. It was startling, to say the least, the way Loki suddenly smiled like that, like he had just seen something truly beautiful. Tony wasn't sure when he'd boarded the crazy train, but when he pinched himself to get off, the pain nearly made him yelp and Loki was still gazing off into the distance.

"Does he look like this?" Tony asked, trying to snap back to reality as he turned the book. Loki turned critical eyes to the picture.
"He is far more handsome," he quipped in that same pride he'd held before, but the softness didn't go, lowering his voice to a smooth texture. "The darkest of grays and the brightest of stars with the speed of the wind and the grace of falling snow. None can match his splendor in all of heaven or the nine realms."

Tony was sure it was pure parental attitude talking now and chuckled at the haughty, matter-of-fact way Loki spoke about the famous eight-legged horse. Tony carefully studied the great stallion his great-grandmother had painted, gaze skimming over the story printed carefully around the picture's frame, nearly choking on his breath.

"...Loki. This book says you're Sleipnir's... well... it says you're his..."

"Mother?" Loki just blinked. "Yes. And?"

Tony's eyebrows were about to become one with his hairline. So Loki had... oh dear Lord. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, pinching between his eyes. He knew gods were full of tricks but still... the awkward level had just reached critical limit. If the heat that suddenly rushed to his face and brain was any indication, this was quickly becoming one of those conversations he couldn't have without the aide of alcohol... and lots of it. "What the fuck?"

"It was my brother's fault, I assure you," Loki chuckled, as though that was supposed to make it all better.

"What did he do, prostitute you out to a horse?" For the love of booze Tony, shut up.

The other actually looked offended. "As though I would lower myself to your level," he bit back. "It was more a matter of situation and consequence. My brother and father refuse to uphold their deals, especially when the reward of money is involved. The builder they hired to craft Asgard's prized walls was no exception. It was by my influence the man was allowed the use of Svaðilfari to help build the wall, but when it seemed the man would actually succeed, my brother forced my hand to make him fail."

"So you seduced the stallion."

"He was rather beautiful for a creature. The color of blood and the blackest of inks," Loki said with a slight smirk. "I lured him away yes. This required the guise of a mare, naturally."

Tony held up a hand. "And you can definitely stop now. I really don't need to hear about your animal-sex-in-a-forest escapades."

"Hmm quite," Loki hummed in amused agreement, eyes resting once more on the book. There was a faint smile on his face still and Tony couldn't help but wonder at what memories could be bringing such life to Loki's expression.

"You really love your son, don't you?" he asked before he could properly register what he was saying, speaking of Sleipnir. He tried to picture the great steed but couldn't, unable to create a tangible form in his mind the way the god had described him. Loki rubbed his thumbs over the tips of his fingers, as though recalling a special touch he'd shared and lost, a day so long ago.

"Yes," he said simply and closed his eyes. "It is different, the love you feel, when the child is of your own flesh, born of your body. It is one thing to be a sire but it is entirely another to feel new life within..." Pain flickered over his face, guilt and sorrow choking the air. Tony swallowed and closed the book, afraid he knew the answer to his question before he asked it.

"What happened to Sleipnir?"
"My father wished for him to become his personal mount," Loki sneered, like something foul was on his tongue. "Can you imagine that Stark? His own grandson reduced to the level of a mere mindless creature." He shared a laugh with himself, harsh and cruel, and his eye's found Tony's, a moment open before returning to the cold steel Tony was used to. "What a wretched beast I must seem to you."

It was then, as he stared down at the cover of an old book that told far too many truths than lies, Tony Stark saw the true destruction of Loki Laufeyson, what had formed him, what had shattered him. It was more than just bitter rivalry and jealous hate. It was betrayal by those who should have loved him and gave him nothing and expected everything, and those who loved him like he deserved and were torn from him without his say. He felt angry and confused as Loki sat and smiled for him, once again slipping behind that mask he wore so well. And when something and everything clicked into place, he stared into those emerald eyes and saw the fractured ghosts Loki had learned to hide so well.

"You'd have been a good father, you know, if you'd had the chance," he heard himself say, but his voice sounded strange and echoed and roared in his ears. Man, what was he saying? His pulse was speeding up, blood rushing far too fast through his head to think straight. He felt himself stand, saw the surprise on Loki's face. It was like the floor was tilting out from under him, his vision swimming as though underwater. "Well, mother too, I guess." His chest clenched as he chuckled, the sound awkward and forced out. God was he drunk? He couldn't remember drinking anything. And why was it suddenly so hot?

"Stark… what-?"

He pushed the book into the slot, startling Loki into silence. Once the tome was clear, he pulled the vial out of his pocket and slid it through into the god's hand.

"Salve for that burn on your chest," his mouth said and his lips smiled when dark brows furrowed. "Compliments of the good doctor Banner."

"How-?"

"Your eyes gave you away," his throat was laughing, hand waving in dismissal. Man, was he getting good at cutting Loki off.

*Something's very wrong here,* his brain supplied, urgent. *Get the hell out.*

His feet headed down the walkway. He heard himself calling back to Loki, see you in the morning, I'll bring more donuts next time so don't waste the ones you got, talking and laughing and, *god why cant I stop talking…?*

The door shut behind him with a groan and hiss.

And then his blood ignited as his heart started to scream.

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No one had noticed something was wrong. Nobody had appeared once he exited the hangar and Loki hadn't called after him before the door had closed. He stumbled to the infirmary, cursing and hissing in anguish as he struggled to breathe. He tore open cabinet after cabinet, ripping open drawers and nearly smashing through the medicine refrigerators, trying to find anything that could
slow his heart rate down and, even better, come across the Vicodin he knew Fury hid in there somewhere.

One shot of some antibiotics and two painkillers later and Tony slumped to the floor, sweating and out of breath, clutching his chest where the arc reactor burned white hot. He stared at nothing for a moment before slowly retrieving the meter in his pocket, hands shaking as he read the percentage that beeped up at him.

Above him in the corner there was a television with live feed from Loki's cage. The God of Mischief was standing near the opening in the glass, the Prose Edda in hand. He touched one of the pages with the same gentleness Tony had seen earlier, before shutting the book and looking up to the cameras.

Tony smiled and huffed an agonized laugh, a dull ache ebbing beneath his fingers as a gaze rimmed in the faint glow of magic met his and held the contact through thirty yards of concrete, electrical wire, and white noise.

"Stark." A large hand was shaking him, bringing his world back to life in a sharp wave of pain. He hissed and leaned back against the wall and the touch retracted quickly, a low voice, rough with emotion, calling his name over and over again, volume escalading.

"My ears are still in working order Thor," Tony finally managed to gas out, blinking up at the blond god as he leaned over him.

"Why are you sitting on the floor?" Thor asked him, concerned. "Are you injured?"

"Nah, I was just trying out a new yoga pose," he shot back, smiling. "You know, to keep in shape." He gestured to himself for full effect. Thor took in his words with a serious frown.

"I do not believe this 'yoga' is of any benefit to you."

Tony just gaped at him before sighing. "Years of knowing you and I should know you have no concept of stupid humor. You and your brother both."

At the mention of Loki, Thor's face fell and, hesitantly, he settled to the floor across from Tony, looking like a puppy that had just gotten kicked. Tony frowned at him, chest smarting. He rubbed over the arc reactor, glad to feel it had cooled down immensely, and turned his attention back to Thor, who was wringing his hands, uncertain.

"I wish to speak to you about my brother," he said after a moment.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Tony eased, remembering all the stories and Loki's pained expressions. He was still angry and confused, but mostly angry, and Thor was about to get the brunt of it if he didn't take the hint and leave. Talking to someone he didn't want to see right now would not end well. His hand tightened around the blood toxicity meter in his pocket, wondering if a screaming match with one of his closest friends would cause another spike. The painkillers were just now starting to do their job. All he wanted was to hit the bliss state, not dig into trenches he wasn't even sure he had permission to enter.

"I beg of you." He pulled out the killer puppy eyes for that one. Tony admitted defeat in a huff of
frustration.

"Sure big guy. Let's talk about how you and Odin seriously fucked him up." Oh, well. That was a good start. The way Thor's face darkened told him his words were just as hurting and surprising as they had been to him, and he hoped vainly that maybe the thunder god would knock his lights out and bring him to the bliss state, no alcohol or Vicadin required.

"Sorry Thor," he ground out after a moment, depressed that he didn't actually feel as sorry as he wanted to, and pressed his temple to the coolness of the wall. "What did you want to say?"

"Those texts you brought him..." Thor started, not knowing how to begin, or perhaps how to get his point across. Tony knew he would start dancing around the specifics of things any moment now, as he was prone to do when he felt deep sadness or embarrassment about something.

"Were those stories true? About his kids?" Tony decided to help him out, no dancing around needed. He'd never been much of a dancer anyway, at least not a good one. Thor's jaw clenched before he looked down in shame.

"Regrettably so."

Tony could only snort at him, because as much as he loved the guy, he was still angry as all hell for a reason he didn't know why he supported. He glared openly at the god.

"So all that talk of family was just a good showpiece? Never pegged you for a hypocrite."

"You go too far," Thor leaned in, tone reaching his dangerous level. Tony just stared back, not an ounce of fear left in him, to exhausted to feel anything but pain. "I love my brother."

"You gods have a funny way of showing it. The guy had his kids taken away for Christ's sake. How the hell is that love? And don't lay any crap on me about Loki being a pathetic father figure, because trust me, I know pathetic father figures when I see them and Loki just doesn't fit the bill. I only needed one hour to see it for myself." He wondered briefly then just when his moral sense had sided with Loki. The part of his brain not addled by heat and ache added, not so helpfully, if maybe this was what treason felt like. How could he put a former enemy over a beloved teammate he knew he would willingly die for? It was unreal on too many levels.

"I have never doubted my brother's abilities or affections towards his children," Thor's expression blanched. "I wished him every right to them that he deserved. All that happened instead was our father's doing and his alone."

"Alone? Bullshit. You are Odin's golden child. You clearly didn't fight hard enough," Tony pressed, already tired of the conversation. "And what about his punishment? You tied him to a rock and dripped snake venom on his chest for two years. You know, I get it, he's the bad guy here, but his son..."

He almost didn't know what he was saying until that line came out and Thor's eyes flashed in a guilty, mortified light. Tony's mouth dropped in horror, the story he'd read repeating in his brain like a haunted record.

"You really did that didn't you? You tied him with his son's entrails."

"Please Tony," Thor pleaded, close to tears. It only reaffirmed what he'd feared.

"Oh my god... You killed your own nephew."
"I swear on my life, it was Odin," Thor gasped, miserable, burying his face in his hands. His voice was grainy and haunted as he spoke through his fingers. "I adored Nari. You must believe I never wished for his death."

Blood was rushing in his ears again, his vision swimming. This time though, he wasn't sure if it was the palladium or just pure rage.

"How can you serve him?" Tony gaped, anger shifting off of Thor towards the ceiling, as though the Allfather was hiding in the vents like the slime he was. He swore. "Is he so powerful you cannot do anything but watch as he murders your brother's son? Is he so ruthless Thor, that you're scared to act and protect Narfi who had to turn into a wolf to get away… 'cause that probably happened too, didn't it?" Thor's silence was confirmation enough. "Jesus Christ. And you wondered why Loki decided to turn against you? Has he ever stood a chance to your father's demands and expectations?"

He expected retaliation any minute, but it never came. Thor, for once, didn't strike out as his pride and sense of honor was torn to shreds before his eyes, so Tony kept going, thoroughly lambasting him as best he could. It was odd, defending Loki like this, but he couldn't stop, even if he tried. He couldn't get the vision of his former enemy being tied down with the intestines of his own child. So whether or not Thor deserved this was beyond the point anymore. He could've kept it from going so far, he could've spared Loki that pain which had to have been indescribable. It was sick and so far over the line Tony was left reeling. And they wondered why Loki was fucked up.

"All he ever wanted was to be your equal," Tony insisted, though how he knew that was true he had no idea. It was like it had been pulled from the darkest corners of him and burned raw patterns through his chest. He clutched at the source of the ache, short of breath, swearing when he felt the core heating up again. He needed to calm down, and fast. "No one ever took him seriously, least of all Odin. You were always the favorite."

"That may be true," Thor whispered, painfully, brokenly, but his blue eyes bore deeply into Tony's, firm and honest. "But Loki has always been mine."

"I believe you," Tony said easily, because it was true. Not many things matched the magnitude of Thor's love and adoration for his baby brother, in this world or the next. "But I'm not the one who needs convincing."

A bit of hope returned to the thunder god's face. "I am forbidden to speak with him," Thor sighed. Tony leaned in close, grinning like a wildcat.

"Maybe it's time you learned to break the rules when it comes to your brother. Food for thought," he stated, and those blue eyes flashed, full of emotion.

"…perhaps you are right Tony Stark."

"I'm always right," Tony huffed. "Now go fluff up Loki like the crazy big brother you are. I'm sure Fury will understand eventually, considering he's been listening in on mine and Loki's little chats. Just try not to make a mess." He settled back against the wall. "Need help sneaking in?"

The smile that graced Thor's face was brighter and full of more mischief than Tony had seen in a long time.

"I believe I can manage it just fine."

Tony spent most of the afternoon flipping through his old files and journals while rebooting his AI system so he could get Jarvis back at Stark Tower. After the poison scare that morning, his whole
body screamed for rest, so he lounged on his couch with his tablet in his lap, piles of books spread out on the cushions around him, a faithful glass of scotch in hand. The combination of runes and symbols he and Jarvis had used to communicate were all written down in various textbooks he'd used in college but never returned, and he thumbed through an old numerology text, nostalgic.

He still had all the keyboards and data memorized, which symbols he had used for each. But as he reprogrammed the main system, an email came in that effectively ended his serious work for the day.

Pepper had forwarded a live video feed from Loki's cell to him, labeled "Fury is going to kill you". It proved to be a ten minute clip of Thor barging into the quarantine area and destroying what little sanity Fury had had for the day. The thunder god had charged into the cell block and, perhaps thinking something had happened on Asgard, Loki had immediately opened the cage with his magic, expression tight. Tony grinned wide at that as he watched, amused that Loki had held the power to escape so easily all along. He'd probably thought a war had broke out or something with the way Thor was stalking up to him. Hell, Thor had probably told him that just to get Loki to open the cell. But that's where anything serious ended as Thor picked his brother up and squeezed him with all his strength.

Tony nearly died laughing, watching as Loki futilely tried to wriggle free, shouting something lost over the white noise as Thor ruffled up his hair. So Thor had managed to pull one over on the trickster. It was good to see, and far too funny. The appearance of the enraged Nick Fury only made it better. Thankfully Steve had been there, half dressed and barely awake as he dragged the cursing man away from the brothers. He'd probably been bunking out at SHIELD to keep Thor company. Tony wouldn't put it past him.

The final five minutes showed Loki breaking free from Thor's grip and the two of them gazing up at the ceiling, where Fury was probably radioing in death threats. Thor backed out of the cage and Loki closed it, before they settled onto the floor before each other, talking quietly.

Tony nodded his head in approval, chuckling as the video ended and he put the books down. There was no way he could keep up with serious stuff at the moment, not after that gem. He headed for what had to be his new favorite spot in the library. Looking amongst his great-grandmother and his grandmother's books, he pulled out a thin tome hidden in the corner. It was covered in old Norse runes, each page filled. It looked handwritten but there were no translations.

It was then that inspiration struck him again, and, grinning wickedly to himself, he headed back towards his workshop, rifling through the drawers.

Tomorrow was looking up.

"Morning already Stark?" Loki murmured before he could call out, sitting on the floor with his forehead to the glass. Tony was really starting to wonder if Loki ever moved from the spot he last saw the god in. Forgoing his chair, Tony settled down across from him in the place Thor had been after sliding a box of donuts through.

"Bright and early," Tony chuckled, grinning in amusement when Loki tilted his head off the glass, a faint red mark on his skin. With a huff, the god stretched sideways for the box, not bothering to put much effort into the motion. The sight made Tony grin; it was almost charming how Loki was moving with a certain lack of the elegance he usually carried. With a barely audible grunt, he curled his fingertips over the box and slid it in a progression of short slides, tugging it to his side. He lifted the lid and paused, frowning as he grabbed a donut, brow raising.

"Thought I change it up for you," Tony explained. "It's an old fashioned style one. Try it."
Loki bit into it carefully, almost critically so, and rolled it around in his mouth. Tony tried not to laugh.

"I think I rather prefer these," he said finally and took surer bites, content.

"I'll remember that for tomorrow," Tony promised. Loki looked at him oddly.

"You have not tired of me then?"

"Far from it," he waved his hands. "So, if you were looking to get rid of me, you're shit out of luck."

Loki snorted around his donut, eyes rolling. His lack of eloquence was really starting to get amusing. Tony thought maybe Thor's little escapade yesterday had something to do with it. Hard to keep up the cool when your big brother swings you around like a child at Christmas he supposed. His clothing was rumpled, his hair in a state of orderly chaos, hastily rubbed back with fingers, with dark strands framing his face. Tony thought he looked better, all things considered, more human and alive and less the charming psychopath he was used to.

"So what is to be today's venture?" Loki asked him flatly, eyeing his bag. Remembering his adventure he'd planned with a laugh, Tony reached in for the rune book, pressing the cover to the glass so Loki could see it.

"Do you recognize these?"

There was no doubting the hint of surprise on the god's face. "I'm beginning to wonder just how you mortals learned of so much."

"So you do know these?" Tony pressed, needing to be sure. Loki nodded.

"I learned them before I could speak, as is the custom of Asgard."

This was working out better and better. Tony pulled out his markers and tossed one through the slot, giving it enough spin so it rolled towards Loki. He blinked at Tony like he'd lost his mind but grabbed it, not commenting on the color as he touched the green cap.

Tony uncapped his red one and drew a smiling face on the glass to demonstrate. Then, cuffing the sleeve of his long-sleeved shirt over his hand, he wiped it away. Loki hid his wonder well, drawing a small line and dragging a finger over it to erase the mark. He studied the residue on his skin with a contemplative curiosity, rubbing his thumb over the rubbery grains. Then he lifted the brush end to his nose, taking in the smell. His eyes crinkled in distaste. Tony chuckled at him before drawing a rune on the glass, catching Loki's attention.

"So what is this one?" It occurred to him that perhaps he should've drawn the rune the opposite way so Loki could better read it, but the god seemed to have no problem.

"That is Sig, our symbol for the sun." Tony filed that away before drawing another next to it.

"This one?"

"Isa, rune of ice and treachery."

"Huh." Tony's mind was soaking up his words with excitement. He quickly erased the runes and drew up five more while Loki watched him with an amused smile. So what if he was enjoying this more than he should? His brain needed the stimulation and Loki was proving to be the wealth of information Tony had hoped he'd be.
"So, got any favorites?" he asked after they'd gone through a dozen or so generic runes. Loki hummed to himself for a moment before writing them backwards so Tony could read them.


"Are we writing your name?" Tony teased him. Loki only smiled and wrote his final rune.

"Thorisat… this is my brother's." His voice was low, a secret underneath. Tony glanced down for a moment before picking up his marker.

"And what's the rune for friend?" he asked softly. Loki gazed at him in silence, a question in his eyes. He drew the rune without looking away. Tony copied it with a grin.

"Do you got any runes with double meanings? I'd love to freak out Clint by writing this all over his windows."

Loki huffed a laugh but obliged him. It was odd, the relaxed atmosphere they were sharing. There was something hovering between them, something unsaid, and more and more questions seemed to be filling Loki's gaze as they went through rune after rune. It was a strange connection they were holding, a connection Tony wasn't sure when it had even been formed in the first place, but he wasn't complaining. Not feeling on edge around the god gave him the chance to really appreciate the intelligence Loki held, and the strange humor the trickster had was actually very entertaining once Tony figured it out. And Loki seemed at ease too, smiling more and laughing often, despite the occasional inquiring glances he gave Tony as he scribbled the runes to commit them to memory.

"Perhaps you should record these in that book of yours," Loki advised, tilting his head to watch Tony study the group they were working on.

"Don't need to," Tony shrugged, copying down the rune for hawk next to the one Loki had drawn. He actually seemed almost impressed.

"You can memorize with but a single glance?"

"Something like that," Tony laughed, winking. "Genius remember?"

"That is rather… impressive."

"Was that a compliment I just heard?" he blinked, feigning shock. "I'm flattered."

Loki sighed but did not dignify that with a response. "And why the sudden interest in my written language?"

"I'm reconfiguring my AI at home," Tony told him, realizing as Loki's brows furrowed, he probably had no idea what he was talking about. He tried again. "My computer at home, Jarvis, needs to be fixed since Doom decided to get cute and rip his hardrive from the ceiling. I was thinking about adding these runes to his database and use them to code all my important files. You know, like my deep dark secrets."

Loki looked bemused at that. "I wonder just how wise a decision that would be Stark, if these secrets you speak of could be so easily read by someone such as myself."

Tony met his gaze and felt something shift, like a stick dragging a line across the sand. Should he step across? Should he step away? Which was Loki expecting? Because clearly, he was waiting for
something, if the sharp light in his eyes was any indication. He shrugged and returned to the runes, taking a gamble with honesty. "I guess I'll just have to take my chances then."

Loki couldn't hide his surprise that time, and Tony smiled at him, letting him know he'd meant it. Trust was something earned when it came to Tony. People had to work for it. Perhaps it was a big step, but he found himself willing to give the trickster a chance to earn it, especially since he knew Loki had the power to spring himself free if he so fancied. He hadn't moved to break out. He was trying to prove something. And Loki seemed to understand, reading it clearly in his eyes. He looked away, unsettled.

Tony brought back his humor by erasing the runes and drawing a stick figure of Fury with a toothy scowl. Next to him he drew his impression of Odin, which had Loki chuckling into his sleeve.

"I'd pay to see these two fight," Tony smirked, adding a long red cape on the Allfather. Loki just shook his head.

"The earth would not survive the outcome," he said with a smile. Tony shrugged.

"I'd move to Mars then. You could come with me if you'd like. We could build a giant sand castle and live in it, put up a big TV to watch them destroy the earth." At Loki's amused stare, he wiggled his eyebrows until the god laughed. "I'd build you a balcony and everything. You know it would be epic."

For the next couple of hours, Tony entertained Loki with his awesome stick figure skills. The god responded in kind, drawing out a map of the Nine Realms with surprising detail.

"I never knew you were an artistic kind of guy," Tony said as he worked, taking in the beautiful marker lines. Loki scoffed, but there was a spark of humor in his eyes.

"It may be difficult for you to fathom, but you are not the only one with talent," he snorted.

After listening to the legends surrounding the creation of the realms, Tony scooted down to a clear space of glass as Loki told him of his favorite star. Loki moved down as well and drew out what he believed the star looked like, drawing on its creation myth and other stories to fill in the circle with detailed landmarks and landscapes. Just to amuse him further, Tony drew out the schematics of it once Loki had finished his drawing, breaking it down to a collection of navigational directions, geometric shapes, connecting lines and equations. Loki took it all in with interest, touching the glass and tracing the lines with a fingertip.

"So this is the world through your eyes," he murmured, curious. "How intriguing."

"Most call it emotionless, only seeing things as percentages and numbers." Tony shrugged. "When it's all you know, it doesn't seem like much."

Loki's expression went flat and distant when he frowned. "Emotionless."

"Well, yeah. Most people experience life through their emotions. Like you and Thor for example. You live by emotion. It's what drives you, gives you focus." Tony rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly anxious. He'd never spoken like this before, not about himself, and especially not to a former enemy. "I don't. My life is facts and chance ratios. I feel so I think I have emotion, but I'm not particularly gifted at expression." He tried a smile, but it felt wrong, so he shrugged himself off.

"Give me the equation to life and I'll figure it out, no problem. Give me two gods with brother problems and I'm forced to take baby steps. Pretty damn embarrassing if you ask me."

He sighed, wondering if he made sense at all. Above anything, it was hardest for him to talk about
himself on an emotional level. It was a place he just didn't go to, a place he couldn't deal with well because it didn't rely on rational thinking. Not to mention Loki's stare was making him squirm and that was just awkward.

"So yeah, anyway," he coughed, trying to steer back to where they were… wherever the hell that had been.

"You say this emotionless thinking is all you know," Loki cut across, eyes severe. "It is my experience that creatures such as you are the consequence of something they could not escape." Tony suddenly felt like he was the one in the cage, pulse beginning to race. Loki was looking at him - no, through him - intent on solving the mystery. "What are you running from Tony Stark?"

You, his brain supplied, not helpful at all. He filed it away for later. "My father's influence," he said instead, daring himself to meet and hold that piercing gaze. After all, considering the past three days, he owed Loki this. "All my life, I was never good enough. My grades were never perfect enough, my inventions never up to par. Always, not enough. I was his heir, a part of the equation to the Stark success. When you grow up as nothing but the means to an end, you start to believe that's all you are. Even now, I'm compared to who he was, what he'd done. So I get it you know, all that shit with you and Odin. I understand."

He swallowed painfully, feeling like he'd just eaten sand. It was the most honest he'd ever been in a long time, and it hurt. He allowed himself a moment of self-deprecating humor, wondering why it took palladium poisoning for him to open up and let people in. The first time it was Pepper. Now it was Loki. If he'd told himself this would happen, he'd have blasted himself in the face with one of his suits.

His words hung in the air like a fog, and Tony rubbed his chest awkwardly, wincing as he felt the arc reactor heat up a bit. Loki's eyes were bearing down into his, fearless and immovable. There was something open about the look, something challenging and searching. Finally, with a surprised blink, Loki took in his appearance like it was the first time.

"You do understand." And he sounded like he'd just been wrung out to dry, stunned and smarting. Tony gave him a faint smile, unable to surrender anything else. Loki eyed him like he was something brand new and familiar all at the same time while their breaths ghosted on the glass between them, curling around lines of red and green.

To be continued…

End of part 2.
Erasing lines - days 5 to 11

Chapter Notes

Hints of ThunderShield and Clintasha in this one, because of reasons.

Part 3

"People,' said the fox, 'have guns and they hunt. It's quite troublesome. And they also raise chickens. That's the only interesting thing about them. Are you looking for chickens?'

'No,' said the little prince, 'I'm looking for friends. What does tamed mean?'

'It's something that's been too often neglected. It means, 'to create ties'…'

'To create ties'?

'That's right,' the fox said. 'For me you're only a little boy just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you have no need of me, either. For you I'm only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we'll need each other. You'll be the only boy in the world for me. I'll be the only fox in the world for you…'

'I'm beginning to understand,' the little prince said. 'There's a flower… I think she's tamed me…"

~ The Little Prince

"Is it hot in here or is it just me?" Tony asked by way of greeting, tugging uncomfortably at the high collar of his turtleneck sweater. Loki just raised an eyebrow as Tony settled to the floor in front of him, panting slightly.

"I have found this environment to be quite pleasant," Loki offered with a careless shrug of his shoulder and returned to studying the schematics Tony had drawn up the morning before, staring intently at each line, trying to puzzle through it. Tony huffed at him and set the box of donuts down to readjust his clothes, the area around the arc reactor pulling painfully. He rubbed at it with a grimace, glancing about as though the machinery holding up the cage and surveillance systems held the solution to his current problem.

"I swear it wasn't this hot yesterday," he stated firmly, wiping sweaty palms on his pants. The movement gained the god's attention and Loki frowned thoughtfully at him, probably wondering if he'd finally fallen off his rocker. Tony felt like it at any rate. His entire body burned from his chest outward, sharp heat spiraling down his limbs, lighting up his veins, coiling ominously in his mind. The arc reactor throbbed with unnatural fire, the palladium crawling across his skin tendrils of flames digging deep into his bones. It was like getting punched by Hulk and fried by Thor's lightning all at once. If this is what it took to be rotisserie chicken, Tony would never partake in KFC ever again, Steve and Thor's puppy dog looks and love for greasy foods be damned.

"The temperature here has not been altered since our last encounter," Loki told him, a hint of mirth lifting the corners of his mouth. "You are well-versed in complaints Tony Stark. Perhaps it is that unsightly outfit of yours causing you the most grief?"
Tony leveled a look at him but chose not to comment. True, the russet red turtleneck wasn't the most handsome thing in his wardrobe, but the lightweight material of it and the cooling vest underneath should've been more than enough to keep the heat off of him. If it worked in the suits, it should work everywhere else. Yet here he sat, burning from the inside out.

Glaring silently in challenge, Tony pressed his hand to the glass. The warmth leaped from his skin and fogged the barrier instantly, creating a smoky outline to the sweaty handprint he left behind. Loki blinked in surprise, brows furrowing at the sight. Curious, he lifted his own hand and adjusted it to fit the imprint of Tony's palm, expression slanting into something unreadable.

"You are unwell?" he asked after a moment, green eyes severe as they locked with Tony's. Tony opened his mouth to answer but was cut off when Loki suddenly straightened, glowering hotly. "And so you have compromised my sweet roll. Surrender the box before you endow whatever stupidity that plagues you onto its contents."

Of all the things he'd expected the god to say, it hadn't been that. Tony gaped at the fierce look he was being given. Loki demanding a box of donuts. It took him a few moments to process it fully. "What?" was the only intelligent thing he managed.

"Has your affliction caused your ears to fail you as well as your brain?" Loki sneered sweetly, as close to snarling as was possible with a smile. "Surrender the sweet rolls Stark, or so help me, I will use my power to forcibly remove you from this room and take them myself."

Tony could only blink at him. "You're threatening me over donuts? Seriously?" He wanted to laugh. Maybe it was just way too early, but only Loki could demand sweets like that and still look gleefully terrifying doing it. Those eyes were sharper than flint as the god gestured towards the slot. Tony figured Loki was probably full of crap about this but the prospect of being flung out of the cell block was not something he was willing to experience, especially since he knew Loki would more than happily make good on his threat. Lifting his hands in mock surrender, Tony slid the box through and Loki caught it, a satisfied light brightening his face.

"You're an ass," Tony couldn't help but grin at him, all cool charm.

"And you are a fool," Loki smirked back, all wicked teeth and smooth movements as he thumbed open the donut box. Tony huffed a short laugh, clutching his chest. Bullied into giving up breakfast. No love for the ailing it seemed.

Asshole sorcerers aside though, he did feel unwell. The arc reactor heated up under his palm and he grimaced, wondering if maybe staying to visit was a wise decision the way it hummed and burned in his chest. He was contemplating leaving to have a long cold shower when Loki pulled out a glazed donut with red, gold, and white sprinkles on it and gave him a look of utter amusement. Tony cursed when he recognized the jelly-filled sweet he'd forgotten.

"That one is mine," he stated when Loki tilted it dangerously close to his mouth.

"Yet it was in my box," was the matter-of-fact, holier-than-thou reply. Loki made no move to return the treat to him either. Quite the opposite in fact, if his razorblade smile was any indication. Tony pointed in warning.

"The old lady at the bakery made that for me special. Therefore it's mine, so get your grubby paws off it."

"How charming." Something light whispered over Loki's face then, a playful glint flashing in green pools. "If it is as special as you claim, I cannot help but wonder what you are willing to do to retrieve
such a prize."

Tony just stared at him. Loki, God of Mischief, former enemy and uneasy acquaintance was actually teasing him, he realized, incredulous. He blinked a few times, wondering if it was just a trick of the light, but the sight never changed and Loki held the donut aloft, his smile growing. There was no doubting his intentions, not even this early in the morning on no sleep. The challenge was clear and Tony shifted painfully closer, biting the bait with all canines bared.

"You are cruel and unusual Laufeyson," he snarked, smirking wide. "You're the reason America created the Eighth Amendment."

Loki actually laughed at that though Tony was sure he had no idea what he meant, deep and delighted at the very prospect. Tony chuckled back at him and the effort strained whatever stability he'd left in his chest. Pain lurching through his core and he closed his eyes against the feeling. He nearly doubled over but held himself steady, leaning forward until his forehead met the chill of glass. The coolness of it gave him something to focus on and he forced his breathing to steady, hissing through his teeth.

When Tony opened his eyes, it was to see Loki frowning at him, donut lowering, the joke already starting to slip off his face. For some reason the sight irritated him. Pity wasn't something Tony Stark took from anyone unless it was shoved down his throat with a fork, and even then he tried to spit it back at their face. A former enemy pitying him was even worse and the thought of their game ending without a fight was just as bad. He forced a smile, straightened determinedly, and grunted as his chest throbbed.

"I can do an impression of your brother fawning over our dear Captain Rogers," Tony offered seriously, desperate to keep whatever this was between them real and alive. He wanted that donut because it was his goddammit, and if Loki didn't stop looking at him like he'd just grown a third head he would readily dismantle the cage to get it. He wasn't a genius mechanic for nothing. His pointed stare seemed to send the message well enough.

"Oh?" Loki soaked in his words, intrigued. And just like that, the game was continued. He brandished Tony's donut again as though nothing had happened, giving it a tempting little shake. "It had better be good then, Stark, or your sweet roll is forfeit and therefore mine to devour at my leisure."

Tony slumped to the floor, painfully smiling to himself. The floor was cool and he laid down, stretching out with a groan. He really needed to stop slinking off to the infirmary like this, he figured, needed to stop making a total mess looking for medicine then collapse on the tile.

An empty syringe rolled off his palm, the few drops of antibiotics left in the cylinder swirling about. He stared at the pale color before slowly reaching into his pocket for the meter. It beeped at him, numbers flashing red.

"Fuck," he whispered, dropping it onto his chest. His arm fell down, useless, before he stared at the ceiling, boneless and tired, and laughed.

The sight that met him the following morning stopped his witty greeting cold on his tongue. Magazines, newspapers, and stacks upon stacks of printed pages littered the floor of Loki's cage, any sense of order lost in haphazard piles and flung about paper. The icing on the cake, however, was the subject matter that, upon further inspection, proved to be of a single topic. Tony blinked slowly, processing the strange turn of events with a growing smirk. So, Loki had finally given into curiosity
huh? Tony wasn't sure if he should feel flattered or amused. At least Fury had made good on his word and gotten the god a damn magazine this time.

Loki himself was sprawled on his back on the padded bench towards the back wall of the cell, an opened article draped on his stomach, eyes closed and undisturbed tranquility settled over his features. Some newspapers were folded at his side, reaching for the floor while a small stack of magazines proved to be a suitable pillow. His hand rested over a picture of Tony's face, fingers relaxed and curled on his million-dollar smile.

"Some late night reading I take it?" Tony laughed but Loki didn't respond, or move, or do much of anything for that matter. Brows furrowing, Tony frowned and tilted his head in confusion, peering over at the god. "Hey, you still alive in there?"

He stepped to the glass to view Loki better. The steady rise and fall of his chest proved that, yes, Loki was still breathing and, if Tony listened intently, he could even hear the deep rasp of every breath he took. It was strangely calming, hearing that, but Tony couldn't pinpoint why. He chalked it up to relief knowing his greatest distraction and newest interest – obsession? - wasn't out of his reach yet.

"Asleep then?" Tony snorted before rapping his knuckles on the cage, trying to wake him. But still, the god didn't move and all other sounds or faces he made, no matter how loud or striking, failed to rouse him. Realizing he was making no progress, Tony scowled and leaned on the cell, wondering just what was up.

A faint whirling noise like a winter's gale sounded near his ear and he pressed close to listen to it more clearly, startled when the glass grew cool against his skin. Loki's magic swirled peacefully around the sleeping sorcerer, curling about him like a blanket. Curious, Tony lifted a hand to the barrier. Tendrils of magic trickled down his palm like snowfall, tracing his fingers with an ice-cold wind. He smiled at the feeling, intrigued and oddly comfortable with the way the charged air eased through the glass into his skin, kissing softly before pulling back.

It was strange to sense this magic so calm, this magic that Tony had seen firsthand tear into buildings and control minds and explode with such malicious energy it shook the earth, raging everything into chaos. It was almost tentative now, the way it caressed his hand, smoothed over his flesh, freezing his arm to the bone. But he didn't feel threatened, or scared. On the contrary, it was almost comforting despite the cold. Tony chuckled before he could stop himself, delighted at the power that rose to meet him when his forehead came to rest on the cage.

"You can see me, can't you?" he asked, grinning wide at the thought. Loki's magic hummed in response, strong and fluid. Tony nodded in acknowledgement to the invisible force before stepping away. Something told him Loki wouldn't be waking up anytime soon and he wedged the donut box into the opening, balancing it there under the flap. Grabbing the red marker from his pocket, Tony wrote LAZYASS in big, bold letters, backwards so Loki wouldn't miss them, before turning on his heel and waving goodbye for no reason.

Whatever was going on with Loki could be explained by one person alone. Tony headed for the viewing lounge, determined to find Thor and get some answers. The god of thunder was notorious for his random sleeping habits, dropping off for naps at the most odd intervals. He'd even passed out once on the back of the couch after a mission. It had taken the combined efforts of Tony and Clint to roll him off and onto the cushions when it became clear he wasn't listening to Steve's wake up calls. Considering the first morning of Tony's little chats, there was a good possibility Thor would be awake, unless he too had gone into some weird hibernation. Unlikely, Tony reasoned, since his magic was no where near as boundless as Loki's, and Tony was starting to get the suspicion the deep
sleep was magic-based. His chest gave a painful twinge as he exited the doors but he ignored it, nodding to the agents he passed by, nearly skipping up to the elevator.

However, when he came to the lounge door and opened it, for the second time that morning his words died on his lips, struck dumb by the scene that he’d encroached upon. Grocery bags of junk food and Styrofoam plates littered with pizza crusts lay over the floor and coffee table. Red SOLO cups were sprawled amongst the mess, odd pinpricks of color on top of stacks of carry-out boxes. Tony snorted but couldn’t stop the smile from coming at the sight.

It appeared he’d been right about Steve bunking out to keep Thor company. The super soldier was stretched on the couch, head pillowed on his arm and Thor's red cape tucked in carefully around him. The god himself was curled up in a blanket near him, resting upright against the cushions. They were close, sharing the same space, the same air, as though they’d been telling secrets and stories all night. Tony wouldn't put it past them either. It was well known the two were closer than the rest of the team, an odd sort of kinship sparking between them, and it was now an uncommon sight to see one without the other there in his shadow. Tony, of course, suspected that something entirely new was starting to happen if Thor's long, lingering glances were anything to go by whenever Steve wasn't looking, but no matter what was going on, it was good to see such battle-hardened warriors sleeping like babies, softly snoring into each other's faces.

Chuckling, Tony backed away and let the door close, peering through the window at the pair before walking away. Intentions failing, his morning was unexpectedly open now thanks to Loki's little siesta and curiosity was threatening to crush him as to the why. Time to think of something else to do, he supposed, and tried not to feel disappointed as he hailed a limo back to StarkTower.

His garage had proven a worthy distraction. It was late afternoon by the time he stopped working, lifting up his goggles with a satisfied smirk, pulling at his sweat-drenched t-shirt. Iron Man's eyes flickered on, luminescent and bright beneath the scrapes in the metal. He still had to repaint it but at least all the dents had finally been completely beaten out. Tony nodded to himself at another job well done, lifting his helmet to give it a quick glance over to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

He barely acknowledged the whisper of the elevator when it opened behind him, but the sound of thick boots, steel-toed and heavy heeled, made him swivel around in his seat.

"You wanted to see me?" Steve smiled at him, pulling at the cuffs of his jacket. Tony grinned back, placing his helmet down.

"Your baby's all done," he informed the blond and stood from his stool, stretching hard as he moved towards the motorcycle waiting under its cover. Steve's 'baby' was the custom built Black Bike that had been gifted to him courtesy of the German government two years prior as thanks for saving Berlin from Loki's warlord complex. Sleek and utterly beautiful, it was Steve's pride and joy and Tony was the only one he trusted enough to handle its mechanics.

Steve immediately brightened at the news, looking like Christmas had just come early.

"You finished fixing Bess? Already?"

"Ye of little faith," Tony quipped, pulling away the tarp. The motorcycle gleamed like a polished star thanks to the special blend of wax he used on his own car collection. He patted a handlebar proudly. "Though we really need to talk about your name choices. I mean really… Bess? For a Harley? It sounds like you're calling a cow."

"A cow is Bessie, not Bess," Steve said slowly, as though Tony was the stupid one. He frowned,
defensive. "It's a good name, Tony. I get it. Steve's old. He thinks 'Bess' is worthy of his bike. Did you know it's based on the musket rifle used by the British in the Napoleonic Wars and-?"

"Oh my God, stop," Tony moaned, glaring half-heartedly at the triumphant gleam that entered those blue eyes. He backed down, adopting Steve's tone. "I get it. Tony's not a military buff. He thinks the name is dumb but its Captain America's bike and Captain America can name it whatever he damn well pleases."

"Thank you," Steve laughed, full and satisfied, and crouched next to his bike, tracing the silver emblem with reverence. Tony shook his head.

"I still say it's a sissy name."

"Hey, it's better than The Metal Steed."

Tony raised an amused brow at that one. "Thor?"

"Who else?" Steve chuckled.

Feeling a smirk coming on, Tony walked to his workbench, leaning against it and folding his arms to regard the Captain critically. It was like Steve had walked right out of a bad romantic sitcom from the 60s. The soldier had freshly showered and shaven, hair combed to its still-lost-in-the-40s perfection. Blue jeans and brown leather jacket pulled over a gray shirt, the unmistakable hint of old-fashioned cologne trailed him as he walked around the motorcycle.

"So," Tony drawled out, "got a fun date with Thor?"

"How'd you know?" Steve didn't even miss a beat, poor guy. He knelt down near the engine to get a better look, blinking innocently over the seat at Tony when he choked back a laugh.

"Aw, how sweet." It was getting harder to rein his mirth in. He grabbed his helmet to get something to focus on and not kill the joke. Steve would only be oblivious for so long after all. He spoke as unassuming as possible. "When's the wedding?"

They'd hear a pin drop, the silence that spilled over them. Tony bit his lip to keep from dying as Steve's brows furrowed in complete confusion.

"Wedding?" he repeated, lost, head tilting to the side. "I haven't heard about any weddings lately." He searched Tony's face for answers, vexed. "Are we even having the same conversation anymore?"

"Ouch Rogers. Forgetting your own wedding plans now? What would the groom say to that…? Or are you the groom? Ha, how epic would that be? Hollywood style with you in black and Thor in a dress." Tony snorted, unable to hold back anymore at the visual, chuckling madly. "You know, I'd pay to see that. Just sayin'…"

"What are you talking about?" Steve asked him, standing warily as though Tony had lost his mind and would try to contaminate him with his stupid at any minute. His hands splayed over the leather seat, fingers tapping anxiously. When he spoke, it was clear he chose each word carefully. "What does Thor have to do with anything?"

"Oh come on Steve," Tony huffed, reproachful, shaking his helmet at the soldier much like a parent to their child with their hand in the cookie jar. "You can't tell me you haven't noticed Thor giving you the puppy dog looks."

"But I haven't," Steve stressed. "As far as I know, we're just friends, no different than everyone else
on the team. I really have no idea why you'd think otherwise."

Tony gaped at him, disbelieving. "That's just not funny."

"No it's not," the other agreed and there was a hint of disapproval rising on his tone.

"No different than everyone else? I don't recall having week long sleepovers with you Cap."

"Of course not," Steve scoffed. "You don't have a brother who's been imprisoned." A protective air was creeping into his voice and Tony felt himself smirking again even as Steve slipped into his Captain role, accentuating slowly, chiding and firm like he always did when he was about to lecture Tony on his insomniac habits and less than stable eating regimen. "I never realized being a good friend was cause for so much suspicion. I'm just trying to help out, give the guy some comfort and distraction. Just because you're allergic to kindness doesn't mean everyone else is Tony."

"I'm simply stating the fact that it looks like you and Thor have passed beyond the 'just friends' realm," Tony eased before Steve could go full commando on his ass. "It's amazing really, how you don't see it. I for one have seen how Thor looks at you when he thinks nobody's watching. You sneak off together in the mornings at some ungodly hour, and let's not forget that one time you shared a floor at my place. I watched Thor go into your room every night for two weeks straight."

Tony juggled his helmet between his hands, smirking in victory. Steve looked a little pale as realization sank in but fought back in a last ditch effort.

"And what about you and Loki? You sneak into his cell block every morning and tell stories and draw all over everything. Why isn't it strange for you and a former enemy to start acting all chummy?"

"How often do you get the chance to pick a brain like Loki's?" he reasoned, undaunted. "It's like handing me a stick and telling me to go poke a bear. I would totally do it, no matter the circumstances and you know it. So your argument is invalid." He grinned wide. "And did you just say chummy?"

Steve exhaled deeply. "I've heard some of the SHIELD agents say it, so I know it's not out of date yet."

"It is when you say it," Tony sniggered. "As for you and Thor, you two are joined at the hip. It's not improbable as to why people would assume things are going on. But hey, if I'm wrong, then no hard feelings."

He could almost see his words hit the soldier and, smiling to himself, let the Captain mull it over, turning back to his workbench. It was odd, working without Jarvis aiding him every step of the way, filling up the silence with intelligent wit and studious answers to every silly thing he asked. All the talk to Steve about Thor had only reiterated the loss of his most constant companion and he slid on a half rebuilt gauntlet, jabbing at the joints with more force than was probably necessary.

"How's it been on the front lines?" he inquired after a quick glance showed Steve wasn't about to flay him alive. Steve sat slowly on his bike, looking a bit thrown, lips pursing in thought.

"Calm, surprisingly," he said after a moment, visibly grateful for the change in topic. "After Hulk shredded Doom we haven't had any resurgence of robot activity and neither Skurge nor Enchantress has tried for revenge."

"So, you're stuck in the waiting game," Tony clucked his tongue, unsympathetic.

"Unfortunately," Steve sighed, draping himself over the handlebars. There were thousands of
questions swimming in his eyes and Tony turned away to twist in a screw, readying himself for the emotional shitstorm. It didn't have the chance to come.

The hiss of the elevator was the only warning Tony had before impossibly light footsteps made a beeline straight for him and, in the instance of two breaths, he had a personal bubble full of angry Clint Barton.

"Stark," he said in a terrifyingly calm voice. "What the hell is this?"

A page covered in scribbles was pressed to his face, crinkling harshly against his nose. Tony just blinked, nonplused.

"If my mind serves me correct, those are Ancient Norse runes," he stated, easing the paper out of his line of sight. Clint's gaze narrowed and out of the corner of his eye he could see Steve straightening on his bike, probably to look for a wrench to throw at the assassin if Tony succeeded in pissing him off more. Which was more than likely going to happen with the way Tony just grinned cheerfully at him. Sure, it was suicide to do so, but he was already dying, so that kind of negated the whole point.

"Care to explain why these were written all over my windows?" The smaller man stepped closer and somehow succeeded in looking bigger, towering over Tony in controlled rage. "And the walls? And the ceiling?"

Tony shrugged at him, unapologetic. "Calligraphy lesson?"

Steve's palm met his face and he shook his head, groaning something unintelligible into his hand. Clint peered down at him with all grace of a hawk that had just marked a pigeon to rip out of the sky.

"I will only ask this once. How the hell did you get in?"

"See, I knew it would freak you out," Tony laughed and shrugged by the assassin, flexing the gauntlet on his hand. He pointed at Clint just as he moved in, probably to stick something unpleasant somewhere equally unpleasant. "I helped rebuild the new SHIELD building Barton, which means every wire, every security system, every door and window access code was laid out in an algorithm I programmed." He smirked at his own genius, waving himself off. "And I've designed my share of booby traps so your room was simply fair game all around."

Clint was silent for a moment, those all-seeing eyes of his sharper than talons, fishing for a lie. Then finally, with a sigh, the anger fled and he gave a slow-forming, crooked smile, the only admittance he would show to being outsmarted.

"What did you write?" He gazed down at the paper before fixing Tony with a look. "Gibberish?"

"Nah, I translated that love letter on your desk," Tony told him, shaking his head in a show of admonishment. "Really, you should know better Barton. Leaving such heartfelt words in plain sight. How rookie. It's almost as if you wanted our dear Agent Romanoff to find it."

Clint actually went white. If Steve's eyebrows went any higher, he'd have a permanent uni-brow. Tony just shrugged at them, patting Clint's shoulder sympathetically.

"I'm pretty sure she can't read runes," he soothed, stepping back to the workbench to set down the gauntlet. "And I put the letter in the top drawer of your desk." He did a little bow before moving on. "You're welcome."

"She's going to kill me," was all Clint managed, slumping onto a stool.
"Oh, stop with the dramatics," Tony huffed, dragging him back up. "I mostly did it to get you down here. You're ridiculously hard to contact sometimes. Seriously, invest in a cell phone. Or better yet, take mine. I have plenty more." He tossed the device from his pocket and Clint caught it easily, amused. "Your arrows have been done for days."

Clint grimaced at the news, slipping the phone into his vest. "...the special ones...?"

"Yep." Tony walked to his second workstation, pulling away the tarp. A pile of arrows lay waiting, all with wickedly curved arrowheads and all very, very neon. Steve snorted at the sight.

"What the hell?" Clint's face distorted in revulsion as he lifted a pink one.

"Lost a bet," was all he offered to the Captain, sighing at his fate.

"To Natasha," Tony added, beam ing at the forlorn assassin. There weren't many things he knew about Clint Barton, not even after two years of fighting side by side and being gifted with permission to fashion his permanent arsenal of arrows. But one thing he'd discovered when Clint had first approached him with the order and the tale was that, of the few things Clint absolutely abhorred, the worst was neon. Of any shade, shape, or purpose. He even refused to go downtown at night because of all the brightly lit signs. Now, thanks to Natasha, Clint had to go into his next mission armed to the teeth with green, orange, yellow, and pink arrows. It was by far the funniest situation Tony had ever seen the ever-careful Clint get himself into and he planned to enjoy it to the fullest extent.

"The shafts are carbon fibre over aluminum," Tony told him, trying to make it less painful, "and the arrowheads are reinforced steel. Should do the job, neon notwithstanding."

Clint nodded, looking like he'd just smelled Hulk's socks. "Glow in the dark?"

Tony chuckled. "As specified."

Steve's brows furrowed into that worried thing they did as he regarded the pile. "Glow in the dark arrows on a covert mission? Surely this goes against safety regulations."

"That's kinda the point Cap," Clint shrugged. Steve frowned, the infamous papa-bear look taking over his face.

"You'll be a walking target."

"Wouldn't be the first time." Clint grabbed a quiver from the table and slipped it on before sliding in the arrows. "Besides, I'm more afraid of what Nat will do to me if I negate on the bet than getting shot at because I have a fucking rainbow on my back."

Not even Steve could argue that point. Tony just shook his head before uncovering more arrows already loaded and waiting in a quiver of their own, this time in a color far more favorable to their intended owner. Clint immediately took notice of the black beauties.

"What are those?" he asked and there was no denying the desire in his voice as he sidled up next to Tony. Tony pulled one out and lifted it so Clint and Steve could see the arrowhead.

"I took the liberty of designing some tracking arrows for you," he said with a proud smile. "They're designed to break upon impact, with the shaft pulling away once it's buried into something. Each head holds a radioactive chip that should pick up on all your instruments. Just let your tracker get a quick scan of each arrowhead and you're good to go. The points are all steel edged in vibranium, which makes them nearly indestructible and should go through just about everything. Just know there's a limited supply, so try to get back all the ones you fire."
It was like Clint had just won the lottery. Steve stared at the arrowhead in fascination before he stillled, staring.

"Tony," he said, concerned, "what's on your neck?"

Tony didn't need a mirror to know what had caught Steve's attention. The branches of palladium burning silver through his veins were hard to miss once noticed. Mentally cursing himself for forgetting his turtleneck to cover it up, he shrugged nonchalantly, putting on his best smile.

"Some weird tattoo design I was playing around with. Used a marker, don't think I'm gonna go with it." He gestured as flippantly as possible and Steve seemed satisfied, losing his worried look at the very least. Clint, however, was another story, and his eyes showed Tony he was already figuring it out. Not wanting drama, he handed the quiver to him, breaking his concentration, and Clint cradled it in his hands, a particularly creepy, secret smile touching his lips after a few moments.

"Thanks Stark. I owe you one."

"Then pay up now." Tony pounced on a chance for a new topic, leaning in and wagging his eyebrows. "Give us the scoop bird boy. Why Natasha?"

Steve too inclined his head towards the assassin, curious. Clint stared at them like they'd missed the obvious and stood there in silence, puzzling out their expressions. Then, it was almost like it wasn't Clint standing there at all, but a reflection, and Tony could feel the smile slip off his face as Clint gazed at him, absolute and terrifying understanding dawning in his sharp eyes.

"She's good against the nightmares," he said simply, because it was that simple. Of the whole team, the three of them were the worst insomniacs with a shared flux of nightmares that refused to sway. For Tony, only hard work and Pepper had brought the best cure, but after he'd ended their relationship over a year ago, he hadn't had anyone but Jarvis, and the AI could only do so much. In the end, Tony's nightmares had returned, visions of desert sands stained with blood, the roar of explosions and screams ringing in his ears. It was the same for Steve too, he knew, and Clint, who was almost as bad at not sleeping as he was.

So Natasha was Clint's cure huh? As terrifying as the redhead could be, Tony was honestly happy for the assassin. No one knew Clint better. It was part of the reason they worked so well. Tony glanced over to see Steve gazing down at his bike, lost in thought. Perhaps he too had found a cure in the form of a lion-hearted thunder god who was more than willing to protect his dreams. It would explain the closeness as they slept, the protective way Thor's cape had been wrapped around him.

Tony didn't even have Jarvis anymore. His best bed buddies were his pillows and sleeping pills followed by a good shot of scotch. And that was only if he made it to bed. Nowadays, his nights were spent in the library or surfing through the internet, reading up on everything he could find about Norse gods and their mythology, losing himself to all but the chance to see Loki just before morning broke and expand his understanding. In a weird way, Tony supposed he could call Loki his new cure because he did keep away the nightmares but only by keeping sleep away altogether as obsessions were tend to do.

He huffed to himself while the sad thoughts pooled dangerously in his mind, wondering just when he'd gotten so sentimental and pathetic. He eased himself down on a stool, running his fingers down the side of his neck to feel the poison burn beneath his skin. Before he could go full pity-party on himself however, Clint peered over Steve's shoulder and pointed.

"Whose car is that? Under the blue tarp?"
Steve turned to look and Tony chuckled, shaking his head.

"Fury's."

"Director Fury has a car?" Steve looked bewildered. Clint blinked at him before glancing at Tony.

"Is it a Chevy?" he asked over Steve's question.

"'67 Impala," Tony affirmed, smiling. "How'd you know?"

"Educated guess," Clint grinned before barking a laugh. "Banner owes me fifty bucks. He thought Fury was more of a Cadillac guy."

"Clearly Bruce sucks at cars. Fury would at least hit Dodge and never go back."

"That's what I said."

"Um, guys?" Steve chuckled, completely lost. He wasn't much of a car person no matter how hard Tony and Clint had tried to covert him from bikes. "Aren't you surprised Fury even has a car, particularly one that isn't standard issue? I mean, think about it… have you ever seen the Director drive anything except a helicopter, jet, and the tank that one time?"

"Now that you mention it," Tony said, mouth dropping open, "you're absolutely right. Huh. I just assumed he bent everyone to his will and made them lug his ass everywhere."

"Why do you have it?" Clint asked, shouldering the second quiver. Tony rubbed the back of his head.

"I may or may not have accidently smashed it into the Empire State Building a month ago during the Doombot attack."

"You smashed an Impala… into the Empire State Building," Clint repeated slowly, incredulous. He looked like Natasha had just asked him to marry her by handing him her bra. "You know, this is why we aren't allowed to have nice things. Between you and Thor breaking shit all the time, it's amazing we even get paid."

The following morning when Tony walked in to see Loki barely awake, glancing over at him from the bench at the sound of the door closing, the first words out of Tony's mouth were "It's alive!" because there was just something glorious about someone with Loki's intellect completely missing a well known reference. He shouted too, feigning shock and amazement before dissolving into a mess of laughter while Loki gawked at him, startled at his loudness and deeply confused when the meaning to the phrase was lost on him, flying easily over his head. He scowled while Tony continued to snicker, looking torn between kicking him out or just going back to sleep, though from the way his face shifted into weird angles, he was seriously considering the possibility that Tony Stark had finally gone over the edge.

It wasn't until Loki's magic snagged hold of his shirt and started to forcibly drag him back towards the door that Tony finally stopped laughing, tripping into an undignified heap as the magic pulled the box of donuts from his hand and he went scrambling after it.

Loki just grinned smugly at him, exhausted but immensely proud of himself when he sent Tony crashing into the cage with a slight wave of his hand before dropping off back to sleep.

Evidently he wasn't a cheerful, good-morning type of person.
"So, question time," Tony huffed when he sat down, plopping his backpack onto the floor with a relieved groan. Loki glanced up at him from the magazine he was flipping through, brow raised. He took that as a good enough sign to continue. "Care to explain the whole hibernation thing? Or am I just gonna have to assume you're part grizzly bear?"

Loki looked rather unimpressed at that, frowning thinly.

"It would explain a few things," Tony grinned at him.

"If you must know, I have not eaten properly in the time I have been here," he offered, setting down the magazine. "I may be a god but that does not mean my body can function without sustenance."

"So your magic was feeding you… what, the newspaper?" Tony bit back a laugh.

"My magic was simply restoring me to my fullest capabilities," Loki snipped, waving a hand. "Otherwise I would be lying comatose and we would not be having this conversation."

"That was probably the smarter option," Tony pointed out before sliding the box of donuts through. Loki caught it easily, a thoughtful expression smoothing over his face.

"Oh, I don't know about that," he said, voice low, fixing Tony with his gaze, stilling him. Those eyes were greedily soaking him in like he was the most complicated puzzle yet found, a mystery Loki was determined to figure out even if it cost him the rest of his lengthy life. Tony had never been the recipient of such an open stare before. It was startling and bordering on hilarious knowing that, for the moment, he was as much of an obsession to the God of Mischief as Loki was to him, though to what end Tony could only guess.

The questions were coming, he realized, inquires into the deepest and darkest parts of his history. And he couldn't stop them, not after all he had taken and received by Loki in the days before. The questions would come and he'd have to answer, not just to Loki, but to everyone listening in – the whole of SHIELD most likely. Cold terror screamed through his veins, the arc reactor pulsing once with a warning flare of heat. He wondered if the god had felt this way while he listened to Tony read snippets of his life from ancient books, pieces of him that he'd thought were well-hidden and secret suddenly laid bare on yellowing pages and black letters. Loki wouldn't hold back until he was satisfied and who knew just how much Tony would have to surrender to sate such interest. His stomach was already twisting at the purpose he read on Loki's face, mouth going dry.

"Your father was talented in fashioning weaponry correct?" was Loki's first careful question. He pulled apart his donut, eating it one small piece at a time without taking his gaze off of the human before him. "And you followed in his footsteps?"

Tony nodded and allowed himself a brief moment of panic, a sharp breath of holy hell this is actually happening, before grabbing his backpack, steeling himself. Extremely awkward, he would at least be prepared.

"If we're really going to do this, I need a drink first," he stated firmly, fishing out two water bottles full to the brim with golden alcohol. The backpack tilted slightly, allowing Loki a glimpse of the heavy armory of booze waiting within. Bottles of rum and flasks of whiskey mingled with a crystal container full of scotch. Cans of dark soda littered the rest of available space, a drink mixer squished in the corner. Eyebrow lifting in amusement, Loki blinked at him, interested when Tony passed him one of the water bottles through the slot.
"Fun fact," Tony smirked as Loki eyed the liquid, testing its weight in his hand. "Two years ago today you accepted my offer and asked for a drink. Not very classy I know, but here's me paying up."

He uncapped the bottle, staring pointedly until Loki followed suit and raised it in a toast. The scotch was a slow, familiar burn down his throat and he smacked his lips appreciatively. Loki took a generous sip, critical while he swirled the alcohol around on his tongue, sampling the flavor. His lips crinkled in distaste but he knocked back a second mouthful, downing half the bottle like it was nothing. He smirked and pulled it away from his lips when he realized Tony was staring. Tony rolled his eyes.

"Show off. It's not a competition."

"A strange sentiment from one such as you," Loki chuckled, emerald glinting beneath dark lashes. Tony shrugged at him.

"I figured Midgard's alcohol would be nothing compared to what you're used to, but quit drinking my expensive scotch like it's water." He pointed his bottle at Loki, giving him a look. "I don't want to go through all this booze without getting totally smashed first."

Loki scowled, something dangerous curling in the corners of his mouth. "Do not be foolish enough to think I will allow it. I have questions much like those you asked of me and it is answers I expect."

"Don't get pissy," Tony snarked back, taking a quick swig. His chest throbbed painfully as he forced a hard gulp down. "I'm extending the olive branch here, trying to celebrate us kicking your ass off of Midgard for what has clearly been a limited time." Loki only frowned and Tony sighed, fingers starting to tap anxious rhythms on the sides of the bottle. "I'll answer your questions in-between," he promised, nodding once to show he meant it. "All of them."

He waited until Loki nodded back before smiling again. Everything felt lopsided when he raised his drink to the cage wall in another salute.

"To you, beaten down and back again," he grinned. Loki lifted his bottle to match Tony's, eyes unreadable and a smile tilting over his lips.

"To curiosity."

"That's not how this works," Tony laughed, strangely elated. "One toast at a time." Loki just shrugged a shoulder before finishing off his drink. Tony followed suit, wincing at the burning sensation. He slid the backpack between them and gestured for the bottle. Loki passed it back.

"All right, we got Captain Morgan, Jim Beam, Jack Daniel, or Macallan." Tony looked at him expectantly and Loki's brows furrowed in thought as he regarded the choices.

Steve's voice over the intercom effectively kicked them from the moment. They both stared up at the ceiling.

"Tony." The warning in his tone was clear.

"Uh, yes dear?" Tony batted his eyes, grinning like an idiot. Loki smirked at him.

"Donuts and alcohol do not constitute a food group. You're not allowed to get drunk on an empty stomach... Miss Pepper's rule, remember?"

"Steve," he gasped, shaking his head. "I had no idea she had you whipped so bad. And you should
know better than to eavesdrop. Your mother must've taught you better than that."

"I'm not-" A long sigh permeated the white noise. "Eat something, that's all I'm asking. We don't need another repeat of Valentines. Loki would enjoy it too much."

"It was epic and you know it," Tony pointed to the speakers. Loki was smiling crookedly, amused his name had been mentioned when Tony turned back to him. "Ever had spaghetti?" he asked though he knew the answer. "I've been craving it like mad since yesterday. You think your inquisition can wait for like, thirty minutes while I go round some up?"

"If you do not keep me waiting," Loki told him, a dangerous texture sliding over every word. Tony gave him a quick salute and stood, hurrying out.

The next five hours passed by in a whirlwind blur in which Tony taught Loki the finer points of twirling spaghetti on a fork and slurping up the noodles just right so a slathering of sauce thwacked against their noses, to the quirks of which sodas mixed best with Jim Beam whiskey. Loki caught onto everything quickly, gaining a particular liking of Rum 'n Coke and proving a natural talent for twisting pasta with a utensil with such grace and elegance it looked like an art. True to form, the god held nothing back amid each bite and drink of what was their first proper meal in weeks, demanding answers about every aspect of Tony's life from where he was born to his schooling to current Stark Industries projects to the beginnings of the 'Man of Iron'. Tony told him about being the youngest student to ever graduate from his high school and joining MIT at fifteen, losing his parents at seventeen, and rattled off about his company's growing interest in clean, sustainable energy that had Loki smirking like the charming, evil asshole he used to be.

Tony forced himself to be as honest as possible despite the fear he felt crawling deep into his bones, drinking a mouthful of alcohol for courage before he spoke each time, skimping out on the truth only when the questions cut a little too personally. He vaguely described Obediah's betrayal and about his time spent as a terrorists' captive but did not detail the torture he'd endured or the loss of his only friend during his stay in the cave, by that time somewhat drunk and the memories swimming across his vision, filling Loki's outline with never-forgotten ghosts.

For his own part, Loki held himself back only once, when his endless questions had tapered off to random remarks and flippant inquiries and there was definitely some color in his cheeks that hadn't been there before. His eyes, slightly glazed but nevertheless focused, flickered to Tony's chest, tracing the faint glow of his arc reactor. The curiosity etched on his face only intensified each time he looked at it but, to Tony's disbelief, Loki did not venture into its secrets. He probably sensed Tony wouldn't tell him the complete truth and was therefore content enough to keep from asking, at least for the moment, just as Tony had kept from digging further into the details of the god's punishment.

In time though, the sharp glint in Loki's gaze promised. He would ask in time.

And perhaps, Tony thought as he pressed tiredly into the juncture of the cage and the walkway, curling his body in, the alcohol in his blood dimming the lights in his mind and drugging his body into exhaustion, perhaps in time he would allow himself to talk about it.

"I'm just gonna nap a while," he slurred, warm and content with the hum of drinks and company a well-missed comfort in his stomach. Loki leaned against the glass in response, tired eyes glancing him over while he too relaxed, eyelids heavy and flickering closed. Tony grinned sleepily at him, lifting his empty bottle in acknowledgement, amazed and confusingly delighted when Loki snorted softly and returned the sentiment.

When he came to, he was slumped on Steve's back like a Tony Stark-shaped sack of potatoes. He
grumbled about being carried like a girl, which made Steve laugh then offer to hold him in his arms like a bride instead. Tony immediately pointed out that Steve probably needed the practice if he wanted to cart off a certain thunder god one day down some flowery aisle before sniggering, because the image of Thor in a dress was still exceedingly funny even if it was drinks seven and eight dancing the polka on his consciousness that made it so.

Steve shook his head when they exited the elevator and Tony recognized his library. He asked the super soldier dopily if he wanted to read him a story too, complete the weirdness of his night, but Steve chuckled a low, no, I'm not reading you stories Tony, and told him about Thor's interest in the fairytales he had related to him the evening prior. He started looking for a book while Tony blinked at the side of his head, about to say something witty regarding sharing children's stories to Norse gods before his brain started functioning again and he realized just what a fucking spectacular idea that is, Steve Rogers, you clever sonofabitch. Much to Steve's surprise, Tony praised such unknown genius with all the big words he could remember at that moment, told Steve he would totally marry him if Thor didn't already have first dibs, and then promptly passed out.

Steve gaped at him with red tingeing his ears and neck, confused and a bit concerned, his hand wrapped firmly around a thick tome full of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales, quite lost.

Loki looked at the book oddly while Tony passed him the donuts with the biggest Cheshire cat grin in his arsenal.

"Ready for story time?" Tony asked, lifting the cover to the glass. The god quirked an eyebrow as he looked it over.

"*The Little Prince*?" he read aloud, not sounding very enthusiastic. Tony pressed his left shoulder to the cage after he sat down, turning his body so Loki could see each page when he opened it.

"This is my favorite book," he told him and smirked when Loki gave it another glance over with far more attention. "Dad's too. My grandmother made this for him. She was quite the artist as I'm sure you've discovered." He nodded to where the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* lay in the corner then smiled softly down at the book in his lap, caressing the hand-printed page, following each familiar pencil mark and paint stroke with his eyes. "So, I'm gonna read it to you, just for kicks."

"I see," Loki hummed, thoughtful, leaning against the glass. He regarded the book quietly, studying the illustrations. "What is it about?"

"A boy from a star who falls in love with a rose," Tony chuckled, turning to the first chapter. "He runs away from his feelings like a pansy and ends up falling to Earth, where he meets a pilot. He learns his love for the rose is nothing to be ashamed of and tries to get back home." He paused for a moment, tilting his head and fixing the god with a stare. "Huh. Kinda reminds me of you, come to think of it."

"Oh?" Loki kept his face carefully neutral but Tony could see the hesitant interest deep in those sharp eyes of his. Tony grinned at him.

"Wanna hear it?" He tapped the page with a finger and Loki gave a faint nod. It was as good a signal to start then anything. So, Tony began reading.

He knew the book by heart, having had his grandmother and mother both read the story to him every night before bed for years. He knew every word, every page, so improvised a lot with the story, paraphrasing it and adding details from the pictures with his own flair. A small amused smile slowly made its way over Loki's lips and stayed there, the god soaking in every word while the hours
stretched on, completely absorbed and focused on everything Tony told him, every picture and phrase Tony emphasized.

Tony didn't read word-for-word until he reached his favorite passage and slowed a little, unable to stop his voice from going all sappy with memories.

"People have stars, but they aren't the same. For travelers, the stars are guides. For other people, they're nothing but tiny lights. And for still others, for scholars, they're problems. For my businessman, they were gold. But all those stars are silent stars. You, though, you'll have stars like nobody else."

He could hear it, his mother's voice, echoing over every word, and for a moment he was just a little child again, his mother a bright light in the darkness of his room, his father a shadow in the doorway, listening in.

It was more the shadow of Howard Stark who whispered, "What do you mean?" than him. He swallowed when a lump formed in his throat, a fond smile forming as he remembered how his mother would turn, not expecting Howard to be there but unsurprised that he was, and share a gaze with his father with a knowing look then return to the story to answer him.

"When you look up at the sky at night, since I'll be living on one of them, since I'll be laughing on one of them, for you it'll be as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh!"

He could feel Loki's stare like a physical touch on his neck and his train of thought completely jumbled up into something undecipherable when he looked up to meet his gaze. It almost burned him, the intensity of it, the way Loki was staring at him as though he too could see the memories flashing before Tony's eyes like a slideshow that wouldn't turn off. The god seemed slightly taken aback, like the puzzle that was Tony Stark had just gotten more complicated, a piece that shouldn't fit suddenly falling perfectly, horrifyingly into place.

Loki's voice was low and searching when he finally spoke.

"How does it end?" he whispered and Tony nearly shivered out of his skin. He blinked slowly for a moment, trying to regain some composure, wondering just what the fuck was wrong with him. He swallowed thickly, unable to understand why his mouth had gone dry, why a fire was igniting in the lining of his stomach, burning through his bones every time Loki's gaze lingered on his. It was like another line was being drawn in the sand, this time by him, the stick dragging around in a curving, uneasy circle. He didn't know why he was drawing it but something about Loki told him the god was amazingly determined to cross it, even if they both had to figure out the how and why.

Tony stared down at the book, another tremor slipping down his spine. He coughed once, confused at the feeling, and continued reading as though he could totally ignore the weight of Loki's gaze, the way the bruises flashed on that pale expanse of neck each time Loki leaned in, shifting on the threshold, treading on whatever it was left separating them completely.

Was this what happened when you let someone in? Tony didn't remember giving himself permission to reveal so much, intentional or not. But Loki was reading him like a mirror, inching steadily closer and closer, a hurricane heading towards a coastline.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

That night, Tony finished reconfiguring Jarvis, humming to himself as he encoded his entire compilation of runes into the system until every secret he held disappeared into a mass of lines and
symbols. As he listened to Jarvis scan through his database, Tony slipped a transmitter into his phone and tablet, adding a wireless projector file to each just for something to do. Even if Loki objected, he could and would turn those glass walls into his own personal movie theatre. He just needed a portable popcorn maker to seal the deal.

"Scan complete. Would you like to view the reports, sir?"

"Nah, I trust you Jarvis," Tony smiled. Despite the tremulous thoughts and alcohol drowning his mind, he was honestly happy to hear the calm voice of his beloved AI fill the room. "Configure all opening files to transmitters 6073 and 5406." The light on his cell beeped up at him, tablet screen flickering briefly as Jarvis did as instructed.

"Configuration complete, sir. Transmission secure."

"Excellent," he said and placed the gadgets into his pack, stretching out on the couch. It was strange how quiet the house had been without Jarvis in every crevice. It was probably the booze talking but Tony couldn't deny how nice it was to speak into the silence and hear someone talking back.

"Welcome home Jarvis," he grinned at the ceiling, tucking his blanket up to his chin, feeling far more content than he'd had in a long while.

"It's good to be home, sir."

When morning came, Tony used the transmitters to slip Jarvis into the main communication and tech systems throughout the SHIELD building, including Loki's cage.

"Jarvis, this is Loki," Tony gestured, introducing the ceiling to the god. "Loki, Jarvis."

"Charmed, I am sure," Loki said slowly, quite convinced Tony was crazy. He did not expect the ceiling to respond.

"A pleasure, sir." Loki's eyes went wide, mouth dropping open as the AI greeted him. Tony tried not to snort too loudly.

It was altogether priceless, made even more so when Thor's voice suddenly boomed above them, echoing through the walls, utterly delighted as some foreign music began to play, blaring over the speakers.

"Do you know this song?" Tony couldn't help but ask when Loki scowled. He looked two seconds away from pounding his face through the nearest wall.

"Sadly," he grouched, grimacing at the playful tune and lighthearted melody. His expression only darkened when Thor started singing and Loki sighed while Tony burst out laughing, forehead hitting the glass in defeat.

It was a bad idea to come. The searing pain in his head and chest should've been the first clue. The fact he found himself in front of Loki without a box of donuts in hand, barefoot and disheveled with no memory of how he got there determined as much.

Tony stumbled against the cage, skin on fire, sweat soaking every inch of him. His body crashed brutally against the glass. He couldn't find his breath, nor his mind in any case, and even Loki looked troubled as he approached, crossing quickly to Tony's side in a flutter of paper.
"Stark," he said, sharp like a whip. His voice wavered in Tony's ears, echoing harshly. His body was going crazy, every pore of him screaming. Agony erupted in his chest when he suddenly laughed against his own volition, falling endlessly into an emerald stare.

"'You're not at all like my rose,'" his lips recited. "'You're nothing at all yet.'"

Loki's brows furrowed and then Tony couldn't see him anymore. His face rippled like a reflection in a lake, a pleasant mirage that resonated through hell. The heat was overwhelming, the room spinning, falling from beneath him. He collapsed next to the cage, lungs heaving and caving in, eyes rolling, limbs convulsing painfully, the whole of his core blazing like a furnace. His vision was swimming and there was a roar in his ears, swallowing all sound and thought in a rush of shrieks and ghosts.

His cheeks ached with the force of his manic grin, his mouth moving constantly the moment a blur of black and white and green smeared into sight. The only part of him remaining reached for Loki, fingers finding nothing but flatness, coldness, a shocking sensation that made him laugh harder with the pain it brought.

Somewhere a voice was shouting but he continued to talk, tongue moving and forming words he couldn't hear or understand. Loki's eyes swam into focus for just a moment and Tony spoke louder, as though determined to make the god listen to whatever he was saying. His hand pressed more urgently to the glass and Loki lifted his own to match it.

His heart was racing, pulse galloping, drumming through his skull. His last shred of reason told him if it beat any faster the organ would burst. He tried to breathe, tried to care, but then a rush of flames engulfed him and he was lost, swimming in a desert full of blood soaked sand, the sun high and overwhelmingly hot, the explosions and balls of fire frantic heat across his face. Someone grabbed him, dragged him away, and he fought back, yelling, kicking, punching, biting, like a wild animal caught in a net.

He heard his name in his ear, loud and commanding, and it became a demon horde of voices, cackling madly as he ripped free and tumbled to the ground. The impact only brought on more agony and he screamed off the floor, back arching in a violent curve. He was grasped again in a much firmer hold and spirited away into strong arms.

More shouting, more cursing, more fighting. Tony wasn't going to let them take him this time. This time he would fight back for all he was worth. He would fight this, he would make it out unscathed —

Water roared over him, stealing his shout. Ice-cold panic kicked his mind on overdrive and he fought back even harder, thrashing about in the pool, desperate to break the surface. Two hands gripped his face, holding him securely over the water. Tony bellowed incoherently what he hoped were threats but they quickly morphed into hysterical commands to his torturer to stop the pain and drown him. The only response was more water cascading over his head, freezing cold. The memory of being held underwater made his body react, and his foot connected solidly with his captor's abdomen, but the grip never faltered and his pleas to die remained unheeded. Tony threw his head back in a desperate attempt to break loose but fingers only drifted to the nape of his neck, keeping him in place. More cold water poured over his face. He screamed at the ceiling until his throat tore and his nose bled with the effort, choking him off in a rush of blood down his windpipe.

Another curse and his face was tugged down so the metallic ooze would pool out of his mouth. He gagged as he was shaken by those hands, a voice shouting, pleading, calling him. He didn't know what the Ten Rings could possibly want him to build this time. A rocket? A jet? A nuclear bomb? He wouldn't, he wouldn't, he wouldn't.
His arms flailed at his sides, useless and losing strength. His fists found something tangible and held on tightly, his legs giving out. Every inch of him shook, the fire lacing his veins in a final rush before the cold surrounded him, slicing through the smoke like a dagger, dragging him down, stunning his body.

He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. He heard his name, a voice he recognized. He was freezing.

"Tony! Tony!"

There were hands on his face, stars of ice against his skin. A gaze of the brightest blue searched for him. The taste of iron and copper and earth filled his nostrils, coated his tongue, staining his teeth. Blood dripped down his chin, coloring the water red. Tony blinked in the haze and the mirage stopped swimming. Blonde hair, strong chin. The vision didn’t waver even when he closed his eyes and opened them as slowly as he could.

"S-Steve," he rasped, jumping on hope.

"Thank God," the soldier gasped, pulling him close. Tony winced as he was embraced, unable to think under the sound rattling through his mind: his own teeth chattering wildly.

Steve pulled him to arms length, cradling his face. He was shivering as badly as Tony was and finally, when the fog cleared and his mind kicked in again, Tony could see why. They were in a swimming pool of some sort but the temperature had been drastically lowered and everywhere ice cubes floated around them, bumping against their shoulders. There were people everywhere, shuffling about in a state of orderly chaos, agents and medic staff by the colors of their uniforms. Thor was leaning over the edge, crouched and ready to jump in at any moment, muscles bunching like a lion’s. His gaze flickered between them but rested more and more on Steve. Tony was sure he was mere breaths away from grabbing the blonde from the freezing water and leaving him to drown.

His concern was not unfounded either. The super soldier was paler than death and when he talked, it was simply amazing he didn’t stutter around lips turning blue. Tony couldn’t even imagine what he looked like at the moment.

"Tony. God, don’t ever do that to me again," he ordered. Raw fear bled from his eyes when Tony moved his fingers, just realizing what they’d grasped had been Steve's shirt.

"W-what the f-f-fuck-k…?" was all Tony could manage, trying not to panic when he couldn’t remember just how he’d gotten there. Steve clutched at him tightly, scrambling his thoughts.

"Thor, grab him." He pushed Tony towards the thunderer who pulled him up with one hand. The moment Tony hit the concrete he was surrounded by medics, hauled to his feet and eased onto a bench. Heated blankets were thrown over him and hands rubbed his chest and arms vigorously to even out the return of a steady blood flow.

Tony peeked between fussing arms to find Steve, guilt tugging down in his chest. His worries were eased quickly, however, when Steve's shirt hit the floor with a wet thwack and Thor wrapped a thermal blanket around him. Then Steve was enveloped in his arms, tugged in close. Steve tucked his head under Thor's chin and laughed unsteadily at something the god said, color already starting to return to his cheeks. Thor ran his hands down Steve's back and shoulders in quick, energetic patterns to bring warmth back to the soldier. Their murmured voices carried around the pool.

Tony smiled shakily at them, pulling his blankets in tight while his mind reasoned through what had just happened. He shook his head at the medics, waving off their concerns, wanting nothing more than to get away. It wasn't as if they could do a damn thing for him now.
Thor and Steve met his gaze. Their faces said it all.

He had some explaining to do.

"Why was I thrown into an ice pool?" he asked his team first off from the doorway. Everyone turned toward him. Steve looked up from the couch and frowned.

"Your temperature was three degrees off from permanent brain damage," he stated and Tony sighed.

"It wasn't Loki," he said and the words left him worn out. He tugged at his blanket like a child would, finding an odd sort of comfort from the motion. Fifteen minutes in dry, loose clothing with a warm quilt around his shoulders did nothing but remind him of how tired he was. He stepped fully into the room, letting the door hiss shut behind him, and regarded everyone carefully. Bruce, ever the calm one, was the first to speak.

"If it wasn't Loki-" he glanced at Clint who just gave him a tight, faint nod "-then just what is going on Tony?"

Natasha, Clint and Bruce all stared at him expectantly. To his right, Steve stood with Thor in his shadow and walked over to him, concern dripping off him in droves.

"I'm dying," Tony said plainly, unable to sugarcoat anything with the way two pairs of blue eyes dared him to lie. They had saved his ass after all. He owed them that much at least. "The arc reactor in my chest is an old model. It's basically poisoning me with palladium which is, in turn, killing me slowly."

Steve looked as though Tony had just punched him in the gut. Clint and Bruce stared at Natasha. She huffed and crossed her arms, nonplused.

"It's different from the first time," she defended herself and the two men shared a long look.

"Is there a cure?" Clint asked the chemist, glancing over at Tony with a growing frown. Bruce shook his head, dejected.

"Not if this is the second poisoning. His body has no resistance to it so it's just building up in his bloodstream. Any cure would involve an extract of palladium to work." Bruce removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes. "It would kill him before it saved him."

"But you've been through this before?" Steve jumped on Bruce's words. "How did you save yourself last time? Why aren't you doing it now?"

"I discovered a new element and harnessed it into a new core," Tony shrugged. "Don't really have a workshop to use or any equipment left thanks to Von Doom and his legion of robots pissing off the Big Guy."

Bruce visibly recoiled, shrinking back with shame until Clint reached out and grabbed his arm. They shared another glaring contest in which the archer reaffirmed what Tony was already about to say: that it wasn't Hulk's fault at all so Bruce shouldn't beat himself up for it. When he realized Bruce was actually listening to Clint, he took that as his cue.

"Barton's right," he eased, fighting down a yawn, "you did nothing wrong. Doom would've torn my workshop apart whether or not Hulk had been there. And it's not like I can't just order the parts I need. Come on, I'm Tony Stark. I get everything I want when I want."
His jest got Bruce to smile the tiniest turn of lips Tony had ever seen. He wasn't quite so lucky with
Steve who caught on to what he hadn't said.

"Then why haven't you?" he demanded. "If you could save your own life, why are you allowing
yourself to die?" Something horrible slid into his eyes then, a dark apprehension setting in. "Are you
trying to kill yourself on purpose?"

"I ordered parts," Tony told him, honest. "I just haven't gotten them yet."

"And why not?" Steve snapped. "You just said you get anything you want when you want it."

"Exactly," he pressed, not even bothering to muster up a smile. He was far too drained to try. "When
I want it. I don't want the parts. Not right now anyway."

Steve actually snarled. Tony would've been scared if he wasn't so busy trying not to fall asleep on his
feet. The blond advanced a step, looking almost murderous.

"What the hell are you doing Tony?" He was nearly yelling, his protectiveness getting the better of
him. "Throwing your life away like that? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Thor moved closer and clapped a steady hand onto Steve's shoulder, halting his tirade. Tony blinked
up at the god resignedly, a strange curling in his stomach immediately putting another face over the
thunderer's. It was strange how badly he didn't want to be here but downstairs in front of a cold,
white cage with one of the biggest assholes known to mankind. He forced his feet to stay put and not
head for the god he'd left behind.

"These conversations with my brother," Thor began and there was a strange spark in his stare, "have
been the result of your impending death then?"

Tony gazed at him quietly. He knew he should feel insane like they thought he was, he should be
mortified with himself. Instead he felt heavy, he felt calm. He felt more sane than he'd had in years.

"In the beginning, it was just for fun," Tony admitted, hugging the blanket more snugly around
himself. "But now… now it's just... different." Now it was almost as if he couldn't function properly
without seeing Loki even once, poking fun and sharing jokes becoming his newest high. Sure, it was
distracting him, his time with the God of Mischief, but he couldn't regret it, any of it. The line in the
sand was drawn and he had to know what happened next. He was far too gone to a place he'd never
treaded and there was no going back. To Mars or bust and all that. "It's something else entirely."

Thor seemed to understand him, reading his eyes intently in the growing silence before nodding once
and pulling away. Steve watched him confusedly, concern returning when he saw the look on the
god's face, and turned to follow him out of the room. Tony didn't move until the door shut.

"Jarvis, pull up the video feed of my little meltdown. Full audio."

"Done sir."

He shouldered past the others to get to the televisions, eyeing the screens. He could feel their stares
on his back and he looked over at them.

"Hey Bruce, you think you can cook up a killer pain medication?" he asked. "Preferably non-
drowsy. I need to have all my wits about me. Well, at least whatever's left in there."

"For what?" Clint asked him, trying a smile. It was more lopsided than usual. Tony just grinned.
"For poking a bear. A magical bear. With a stick." Clint barked a laugh at that and Bruce chuckled quietly next to him. Natasha just watched them with those sharp eyes of hers, the corners of her mouth barely lifting. Tony took that as a good sign. He turned back to the video.

"Start it when I just come in," he instructed and the screens came to life. Within moments he watched himself slam against the cage from seven different angles.

"Stark," he heard Loki say when he crossed the cage to see what was happening. Tony's stomach did a little flip at the sight.

"Enhance audio."

"You're not at all like my rose. You're nothing at all yet." Tony frowned thoughtfully at that. Seven Tonys on the screen collapsed to the ground and Tony stepped closer, listening intently. It wasn't his body he wanted to study. He wanted to know what he'd said, what he'd revealed in this moment of mayhem to the god who currently occupied almost all his thoughts. He owed Loki an apology for this, for whatever he'd given away. He swallowed down the bile that threatened to rise at the thought.

"No one has tamed you and you haven't tamed anyone," was what he'd said next. The Little Prince had rolled off his tongue verbatim. Tony blinked at himself, surprised.

"Stark, what-?"

"You're lovely, but you're empty... One couldn't die for you."

Even from here, through the white noise, through the grain and pixels, he could see the pained shock of Loki's expression when his words hit. Tony had laughed and sounded quite mad when he'd pressed his hand to the glass.

"It'll look as if I'm suffering. It'll look a little as if I'm dying. It'll look that way. Don't come to see that; it's not worth the trouble."

He'd started quoting a different section then? Tony watched, stunned, as Loki pressed his hand to meet Tony's and leaned in as close as the glass would allow.

"I won't leave you," he heard Loki say and heat rushed up his neck, biting his ears. The god had quoted the story right back, that was all, but it seemed far more significant, far more than what simple memorization could bring. He'd given Loki the book to read before they'd parted and the fact Loki knew just what to say struck a cord deep within him. He swallowed thickly, his stomach chasing a flock of little drunken butterflies.

"You understand. It's too far. I can't take this body with me. It's too heavy." His voice had started to sound more desperate then, fingers flexing hard on the cage. "But it'll be like an old abandoned shell. There's nothing sad about an old shell..."

Loki had quickly glanced upwards.


"You should give up on me," Tony heard and it wasn't reciting this time but truth, broken and tangled honesty on a rasping breath he couldn't believe he'd made. He stared at the screen in shock. "Give up... I'll only disappoint you."
What happened next, Tony had to re-watch three times, blaring the volume to it's fullest extent. What he heard changed everything while a god rubbed out the line he'd drawn, set it on fire, and danced gleefully on the ashes.

Loki had bowed his head, just slightly, tilting down to match his gaze. He'd been calm, resolute, as he watched Tony come undone by the seams.

His voice had been deep with meaning in a whisper, a promise, he wasn't meant to hear.

"No."

Tony collapsed numbly into the corner where the walkway met the cage, leaning his forehead to the glass with a sigh. Loki eyed him warily, settling down after a moment of hesitation, tilting to face him, The Little Prince in his lap.

"Sorry," Tony murmured, curling up in his blanket. Loki scoffed.

"Surely that is not the best you can do," he frowned. Tony chuckled painfully.

"I'm dying. Is that what you want to hear?" He hadn't meant to sound so bitter and felt a little bad when Loki's expression pinched minutely. Adjusting so the hot throb in his temple met with the coolness of the glass, Tony lifted his hand from within his blanket, fingertips sliding on the barrier until his palm was flat against it. Loki only stared at him, watched as his fingers curled. Then slowly, guardedly, his own fingers rose to meet his, matching like a reflection.

"What is killing you?" Loki asked him and each word was low and careful.

"What's keeping me alive."

Loki looked up sharply but Tony offered nothing else, transfixed by the slender detail of the god's hands compared to the roughness of his own, amazed at how they seemed to fit despite the flaws and imperfections shared between them. He tapped a finger absently.

"May I read to you?" Loki asked him quietly, his eyes too fixed on the curve of their hands. He looked up only when Tony snuggled closer to the glass, a goofy grin stretching over his mouth.

"Ooh story time?" He pressed his face to the barrier, letting it morph his features into a strange expression. Loki chuckled at him and opened the book, flipping earnestly to a certain page. Tony shifted so his nose wasn't squished, securing his blanket more tightly around himself. His hand was starting to warm on the glass, the heat from Loki's palm seeping into his own. It was comforting in an incredible, impossible way, and Tony smiled despite himself, chalking up such ridiculousness to exhaustion.

"'The only things you learn are the things you tame,' said the fox, "'People haven't time to learn anything. They buy things ready-made in stores. But since there are no stores where you can buy friends, people no longer have friends. If you want a friend, tame me!''" The god paused a moment, adjusting himself. Tony took the opening when he saw it.

"'What do I have to do?' asked the little prince,"" Tony recited with a small smirk. Loki rolled his eyes.

"'You have to be very patient,' the fox answered. 'First you'll sit down a little ways away from me, over there, in the grass. I'll watch you out of the corner of my eye, and you won't say anything.
Language is the source of misunderstandings. But day by day, you'll be able to sit a little closer…” Loki allowed the book to close. He turned towards Tony, expression unreadable.

"And the next day the little prince returned," Tony filled in the gap.

"'It would have been better to return at the same time,' the fox said. 'For instance, if you come at four in the afternoon, I'll begin to be happy by three. The closer it gets to four, the happier I'll feel…'"

He stopped then, completely, as though realizing he'd nearly missed something vital. Tony only blinked when Loki gazed at him, steadily, amusement and something far more potent curling in his mouth.

"Are you trying to tame me Tony Stark?" he asked. Tony smirked at the implication.

"Do you want me to?" he countered, ignoring the way his heart did an annoying little flip-flop against his ribs. Loki hummed to himself, looking off into some distant place, thoughtful.

"Taming a God of Mischief. What pluck you must have to attempt the impossible."

"I could say the same to you," Tony smiled a secret smile, closing his eyes. "Taming a Midgardian. How far you have fallen, Little Prince, to seek answers in one such as me."

End of Part 3.

To be continued.
Chapter Notes

One more chapter after this. Chapter 5 is currently still a wip... my life has been pretty busy and frustrating, but I'm hoping to get it finished soon. Not sure when though.

Thank you everyone for your interest in this little piece of writing. All the support means a lot. Thank you.

Part 4

"People have stars, but they aren't the same. For travelers, the stars are guides. For other people, they're nothing but tiny lights. And for still others, for scholars, they're problems. For my businessman, they were gold. But all those stars are silent stars. You, though, you'll have stars like nobody else.'

'What do you mean?'

'When you look up at the sky at night, since I'll be living on one of them, since I'll be laughing on one of them, for you it'll be as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh!'

And he laughed again.

'And when you're consoled (everyone eventually is consoled), you'll be glad you've known me. You'll always be my friend. You'll feel like laughing with me. And you'll open your window sometimes just for the fun of it... And your friends will be amazed to see you laughing while you're looking up at the sky. Then you'll tell them, 'Yes, it's the stars; they always make me laugh!' And they'll think you're crazy. It'll be a nasty trick I played on you...'

And he laughed again."

~ The Little Prince

Everything hurt. Tony groaned as he came to, blinking slowly through the haze of dreamscape falling away. What he noticed first was the uncomfortable numb pressure in his legs and the dull ache in his shoulder. His cheek was stretched on glass, tugging at an awkward angle and his neck gave a warning twinge when he straightened. What he noticed second was the chill all around him where his blanket had slipped down and the curling heat centered on his palm. He realized, slowly, that his hand was still pressed to the barrier, drying sweat catching his skin valiantly on the surface. His fingers were relaxed and curled in, and they weren't alone.

The events of the previous day came flooding back in a heady rush. Tony flexed his knuckles, stretching out the joints to match his fingertips to Loki's. A wide, disbelieving smile grew over his mouth. He sat up fully, a strange thrill shooting down his spine as he stared at the god, fast asleep and stretched out next to him on the floor, The Little Prince tucked carefully to his chest. For a moment Tony couldn't breathe, lost in amazement at such a rare scene, transfixed with every steady breath as it rose and fell, built and caved, the humming tenor of a whisper sliding over every exhale.
Grinning ear to ear, Tony eased down and collapsed onto his side with all the grace of Hulk falling through a ceiling. His pained grunts and muffled shuffling were enough to bring Loki back to consciousness and two bleary eyes peered over at Tony while he settled. He chuckled when an elegant eyebrow arched in sarcastic statement.

"Did we just sleep together?" Tony asked before Loki could even think about unleashing an undoubtedly witty remark on the impressive cowlick he was sporting. At Loki's odd look he scoffed playfully: "And you didn't even buy me a drink first." A slow smile tilted Loki's lips and Tony looked him over, humming. "Well, considering the glass and the fact that we're fully clothed, I guess it's safe to say false alarm, which is probably a good thing. I'm pretty sure I'm not that easy."

Loki chuckled at that, deep and earnest, and slowly tilted onto his back with a soft groan. His hand pulled away and he bent the fingers in, restoring movement to the stiff joints. Tony followed suit, flopping around until he was completely stretched out on the floor. His body shook and popped in sharp relief. He studied his palm as the last of the warmth they'd shared cooled from his skin.

"Jarvis, what time is it?"

"It is now four thirty-six in the morning sir. You've been asleep for almost twelve hours."

"Huh, I can't remember the last time that happened." Tony turned his head to see Loki gazing at him quietly, something unreadable flickering over his face. "Must've been more tired than I thought I was."

His chest flared with heat and he shifted onto his side once again with a grimace, curling in and wrapping his blanket around more firmly. His skin felt hot and sticky; his pulse throbbed hard against his temples. The coolness of the barrier did nothing to soothe the ache when he pressed his forehead to it. Loki's stare traced each breath he took as it fanned on the glass in ghostly patterns.

"I feel like hammered shit," Tony groaned but wasn't surprised. Riding out the aftermath of a physical and mental meltdown by turning a glass cage into a movie theatre, and then spending upwards of seven hours explaining the ins and outs of Star Wars to a god wasn't the best form of cure his body needed. Entertaining, yes. Healthy, probably no.

"Stark," Loki stated, drawing his gaze. A frown darkened his face. "There is a marking on your neck."

"Just noticed huh?" Tony chuckled. "Dying remember? That's part of it."

"I did not just notice it," Loki quipped, haughty. "I have spent most of the night trying to expound just what substance could ignite such a color within blood but have not succeeded." He propped up on his elbow and peered down at Tony in frustration. "It vexes me."

"I love how concerned you are," Tony huffed. "Can't say I'm sorry for vexing you though." He sighed, rubbing at his eyelids to chase away the last shadows of sleep. "Try palladium."

Loki only looked more puzzled, frown deepening. Tony blinked at him, trying hard to ignore the way his heart leapt at the provocative perspective he held. From here that white throat was on full display, the barely fading bruises disturbingly apparent. The angles of Loki's face were in greater contrast with the white lights directly overhead, and there was just something about the way the god leaned over him that was far too enticing for so early in the morning. Those eyes were alight and focused solely on him, a concept both confounding and thrilling all at once, like he was seeing Loki properly for the first time.
Attraction, he realized with a charge of fire and horror through his stomach. He was actually attracted to the most irritating, obnoxious, charming bastard he'd ever come across: Loki, God of Mischief. Sassafras and formidable foe. Attracted. In that way. And he wasn't even drunk.

He was so beyond screwed it wasn't even funny.

"Palladium is a power source," Tony coughed out, fighting down the revelation. "In long expanses of exposure, it gets poisonous." He tugged awkwardly at the neckline of his shirt and pulled it to his collarbone so Loki could see the webbing of inflamed silver burning in his veins. Loki studied it all behind a careful mask of indifference, his silence doing nothing for the sudden shaking in his fingers. It was probably idiotic to do so, but Tony reached into his pocket for the palladium monitor, pressing the button for a reading. When it beeped at him, he turned it so Loki could read the numbers.

"Sixty-one percent," the god said aloud, tone flat. His jaw tightened when he stared at Tony. "Strange you have allowed this to reach such heights."

"Hey, I'm blaming you for that one," Tony swallowed thickly. He watched in amusement as outrage colored Loki's face and waited until he just opened his mouth to flay him alive before adding: "Your own damn fault for being so interesting."

Loki seemed stunned at that, the fires of anger bleeding from his cheeks to bite at his neck and ears instead. Tony noticed the faint flush and flashed his cheekiest grin.

"It's true you know. You're interesting, to the point it's just about irritating," he stated into the glass, fanning the flames. There was an unmistakable heat climbing into his bones, an inescapable pleasure lighting in his chest at Loki's speechless state and the knowledge that he had caused the god to look like that, like he'd never heard such words spoken about him. For all Tony knew, he probably hadn't. The open shape of his mouth, the low smolder in that gaze was all for him, because of him, and that had his mind flying to blissful places all rational thought and bodily pain just couldn't reach.

God, he had it bad.

"With all the crap I've pulled up about you, it's a wonder I sleep at all these days," he laughed quietly. "Though I suppose you did help me sleep last night. Twelve hours? That's got to be a new record."

Loki regarded him without a sound, contemplative. For a few breaths he simply stared at The Little Prince and then slid the book away and settled back on his side, leaning in close so that their eyes held on the same level. At such proximity, Tony could see every single question swimming in a thousand shades of green, could see the thoughts as they came and went from the forefront of Loki's mind. Unfolding curiosity and uncertainty darkened the hues.

He was striking, annoyingly so, a splendor forged in pain and magic and divinity. The barrier between them had never been more apparent than it was at that moment, taunting his fingertips when they reached blindly forward. Loki was untouchable, untamable, and that only made him more alluring. Tony surely had to have gone off the deep end to be thinking such things, but he'd never gone into anything half-assed anyway. Shoot, fire, aim and such. If he was going to fall, might as well fall full throttle. He'd never been able to deny himself anything after all.

"I think you're good for me," Tony admitted softly and couldn't help but smile at the way the god blinked in surprise. His gaze dropped when the god's jaw clenched minutely, his mouth moving against words that wouldn't come. Tony stared at the curve his lips made when they parted.

"Blatant flattery will gain you nothing," Loki murmured. The burn in his voice belied just how aware
he was of what held Tony so fixated and how undecidedly curious he was as to the why. Tony huffed a laugh, pleased at how fully he'd captured Loki's attention. He stared boldly at the curve of Loki's chin, lingered down his neck, and then caught the other's look.

Now that there were no more lines in the sand, he had to prod and poke with spread fingers and toes until Loki pushed back. The thought should not have felt as exciting as it did. It was as though he'd just drunk down a couple hundred shots of straight whiskey.

"I'm sorry," he teased, testing the waters. "Was I being that obvious?"

Four hours of intense, eye-sex-worthy silence with a god and one very angry CEO of Stark Industries later, Tony snuggled down into the couch of the viewing lounge (that smelled overwhelmingly of a certain super soldier and thunder god) with a dopy grin on his face and more than a little high on the extremely amazing painkillers Bruce had managed to concoct – lithium dioxide with a splash of pure awesome. Pepper all the while mussed over him, spitting out a whole bunch of reprimands he was all too happy to ignore. Steve showed up at some point too with news of Loki's soon-to-be release, patting his shoulder with a tilted, empathetic smile as the red-haired woman verbally laid him out on a silver platter once the message had been relayed. He handed Tony a bowl of hot soup to slurp up somewhere in the middle of her tirade.

It wasn't until Thor walked into the room that Tony actually moved. Stupid on medicine and giggling like an idiot, he practically jumped into the god's arms.

"I think I might totally love your brother," he stated proudly, quite out of his mind. Steve unsuccessfully tried to stifle an obnoxiously loud snort with his palm and the handful of important documents Pepper had been shaking at his face tumbled to the floor. Thor looked completely shocked at the declaration, blue eyes wide.

"I cannot deny I am pleased to hear such words, Anthony," Thor said slowly, the beginnings of panic inching into his voice. He glanced Steve's way, hoping for help, but the soldier was too busy trying not to laugh aloud at the terrified face he was making, leaving Thor to grasp desperately for something to say. "Loki deserves someone to love him the way he needs. It is pleasing to find that it is you to do so…"

"Probably. Maybe," Tony lifted a finger thoughtfully, stumbled back a few steps. "I blame you," he finished with flourish, pointing at Thor's nose before sliding into the darkness of ignorant bliss.

"So, your last day of incarceration. We gotta celebrate," Tony smirked and passed a water bottle full of Rum 'n Coke through the slot. Loki caught it with ease, a slight smile touching his face when he recognized the drink and uncapped it. Tony followed suit with his own bottle of Macallan, lifting it high. "A toast then, to your impending freedom."

Loki returned the gesture, drinking deeply. He pulled away the bottle and studied it with an unreadable gaze. It wasn't until Tony snorted that he glanced up.

"Don't look so excited now," Tony snarked.

"And why should I not?" Loki shot back, matching the lightness of his tone, a dark contrast to the pinched expression he wore. "After all, excitement is the only appropriate response to the knowledge that I will no longer be trapped in this cell and you will no longer come to bother me."

"Ouch," was the only thing Tony could think of to say to that. The closed off look the god was
giving him had him thrown for a loop, and as the truth of his words sank in, a cold chill seeped down deep into his bones.

Loki was being freed and Tony hadn't really thought over just what that meant. The cage had been the only legitimate reason Tony had had to come here every morning like this, being able to rub the imprisonment in Loki's face the only explanation he could give for staying with the god for so long. Attraction was one thing, but take away the glass and what then?

Tomorrow there would be no stabilizing agent to keep them from ripping into each other, no firm ground to gain his bearings. Tomorrow these morning meetings, this routine they'd fallen into would cease to exist. Tomorrow all that they had built could shatter into oblivion.

Tomorrow Loki would no longer be just a pleasant distraction, an obsessive dream. He'd be a reality, far more real than either of them imagined, a reality he'd have to face one way or another. There would no longer be any boundaries here, no longer a physical barrier to stand between them, and suddenly he wasn't sure he could handle that.

"You're right," Tony lauded after a moment, because there was nothing else to say. He felt like Hulk had just punched him through the floor. Loki's eyes flickered over his face, a strange sort of hesitance settling over his features.

"Stark," he began but was cut off when the speakers overhead suddenly screeched and Steve's voice came through in a rush of static.

"Tony. Tony, come in!"

The tension in his voice was enough to get Tony to his feet, hardly noticing the way his body swayed. He leaned a hand against the cage for support.

"I'm here Cap," he spoke loudly to the ceiling but Steve didn't seem to hear him. His voice cut out in a wave of erratic pulses that made Tony's stomach sink.

"Jarvis, connect my headset to the communication feed," he ordered, digging through his pocket for his earpiece. The heavy white noise that rattled his eardrums let him know the feed had gone through when he set the bud in his ear. Tony could hear screeching metal and the unmistakable sound of repulsion shockwaves in the noise. Whatever was going on, it sounded like Captain America had just become the most colorful target for bullets and energy blasts in all of New York. Joy. "Who'd you piss off this time Rogers?"

"More like we," the soldier grunted back amidst the rain of metal shells ricocheting off his shield. "Doom decided to grace us with a gift from beyond the grave."

"How generous of him. Anything I'd like?"

"Well, he programmed the last of his Doombots to attack Saint Peter's Orphanage."

No wonder Steve was feeling the strain. A building full to the brim with helpless children. That counted up to constant defense and offense all at once. One wrong move could cost lives of the most innocent variety. Leave it to Victor van Doom to attack a bunch of kids without warning long after his time of death to throw off suspicion. Deceased asshole. "What's your status?"

Steve shouted something lost under a repulsor blast, an answering call alerting Tony to another presence in the soldier's immediate vicinity he hadn't noticed until then.

"Thor's with you?" he asked, tense to the bone. When no one answered he pressed on his
"Communicator more firmly, voice rising. "Steve? Steve."

"Yes, I have Thor with me." A shaking laugh echoed through the feed. "As of right now, he's the only thing keeping the building from coming down."

The thought of the thunderer holding up a ceiling of solid concrete and brick made Tony frown, and a heavy weight dropped low in his gut. "Who else is there?"

"Natasha and Clint are on the top floor. Couple bots have them pinned in the library. There's a whole bunch of nuns and kids up there with them. Thor and I are trapped in the dining hall with a group of our own. We can't get to them."

A faint pause came through then, permeated by the rustle and shuffling of combat. There was a harsh clang of metal as Steve smashed a Doombot with his shield and the sound of rocks and bricks falling around the impact. "Hulk would be of no help because of the kids but we need assistance."

A hesitant hush stretched and when he finally spoke again, Steve sounded like those seventy years of sleep had finally managed to bite him in the ass. "I have no right to ask this... considering-"

His voice tapered off into pained silence. "We need you Stark."

Only Steve Rogers could sound so damn regretful and solemn in the middle of a battle, forced into the impasse of offensive defense with the weight of a building about to fall on his head. Tony grinned faintly.

The shifting of glass against his palm made him turn. Tony hadn't realized Loki had come to stand with him during the conversation, face pale and drawn when he lifted his hand to fit against his. It could've been just a trick of the light, but he actually looked bothered, concerned even, and everything suddenly seemed all the more real because Loki was looking at him like he was about to be led off to slaughter. He fixated on Tony and nothing else, trapping him in place. Slowly, Tony reached for the meter in his pocket. He glanced away only when it beeped his reading.

"Sixty-four percent," he murmured to himself, calculating the odds. Loki shifted closer to read the numbers and his knuckles flexed hard on the barrier. When their eyes met, his were clever with admonishment and something darker in the irises, glinting sharply in endless green. Loki looked like he was two seconds from killing him and he didn't even know the true danger in what lay ahead, that the palladium would flow uncontrollably into his veins as he battled, unstoppable.

The toxicity level would rise at least twenty percent under the strain of running the suit, possibly more if he was forced to push it to its absolute limits. Loki of course didn't know that, not even Steve did, but he was sure the god sensed the underlying message with a hunter's accuracy, read it in his gaze, what lay underneath everything Tony hadn't said. So Tony let go, if just for a moment, unveiling everything with the most open look he could school his face into. He owed him that much at least, to allow his intent to come through in undisclosed honesty. Loki visibly tensed, his expression contorting under a rush of unnamable emotions, and Tony knew he got the message.

"Jarvis, cut connection to the speakers. Run feed on my earpiece only." After his tipsy stunt with Thor yesterday, Tony knew Pepper was somewhere in SHIELD headquarters, watching him closely. What he was about to say would only make her, and anyone she might have told about the poisoning, try to stop him. He pointedly ignored the way Loki flinched at his voice but the heat from his stare remained with him, even when the calm came in a wave of acceptance. His sense of duty solidified in his chest, a stable and sure weight against his heart.

"Like I wouldn't come," Tony stated into the speaker. He could hear Steve about to object, probably freaked out by Tony's silence and about to go back on his call for aid when his reason kicked in. He cut across quickly and firmly before any guilt-ridden apology came. "There's kids involved Cap. What kind of superhero would I be if I let you all down?"
Not even Steve could argue with that. "...if you're sure Tony."

His hand flattened against the glass for the final time.

"I need the access code to my suits." His voice sounded faraway, alien, in comparison to what he and Loki were sharing at that moment, written in the fog of their breaths, the mirror image of their bodies. The god was a statue of tension, all fractured planes and shattered roughness, but there was something there, dilating against each dark pupil that told Tony he wouldn't hold him back, no matter how unhappy he was about the situation, and that he truly was, in fact, disconcerted with this ending. Tony nodded once in appreciation, in acknowledgement to whatever it was that shifted between them: the raw intensity of nameless, indescribable feeling and visceral understanding. He was unable to stop the smile from coming when Loki returned the gesture, his lips pressed in a grim, quiet line.

"We'll need Bruce too."

"Tony, we can't use Hulk," Steve said, breathless. He growled deeply as something hit him hard in the side. It snapped Tony out of his reverie with a quickening heartbeat, his pulse thrumming loudly in his mind.

"I didn't mean Hulk, just Bruce," he stated, taking a step from the cage. "It sounds like we're gonna need that awesome med kit of his. Not to mention Banner's the only one who can get a needle near Barton without him getting all twitchy."

"All right, but hurry."

Tony didn't need telling twice.

"Jarvis, relay all audio feed to Loki's cell and set up a communication line directly to my headset." He stayed a final breath at such proximity while the AI did as he was told. Then his hand fell and he turned away. It was like moving in slow motion when their gazes finally unlocked. Loki inclined his head, not watching as he left, fingertips trailing unnoticed patterns over the glass.

It wasn't a goodbye. Not yet anyway.

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After two hours of dismantling robots, holding up the ceiling of a collapsing building, and shielding groups of children from bullets, Tony was still alive and his suit still remotely functional. Somehow.

"Remind me to send Barton along with a bouquet for the Big Guy the next time you two go Hulking out or whatever the hell it is you do together," Tony gasped once his helmet was off. He grinned shakily at Bruce. "Shredding Doom is now the central highlight of Hulk's career. We need to throw a parade, or build him a statue." The scientist chuckled quietly at him, shaking his head in fond exasperation.

"I'm sure he'd love that," he snorted, cutting across just as Tony started to rattle off the best materials needed for a giant likeness of Hulk. He fingered his med kit with a concerned frown. "You okay Tony?"

"Never better Doc." Tony fought down a coughing fit, lungs screaming. It was hard to breathe and his legs were about to buckle from underneath him, but he hadn't collapsed yet, which was always good sign, so he gave Bruce a thumbs up and didn't protest the small pill and water bottle he was handed.

"Drink slow and let me know if you need anything else," Bruce ordered as he headed back towards the ambulances, cutting a path straight for where Natasha was losing the battle trying to get Clint into
a SHIELD van. He was far too busy resisting medical help to comply. Tony watched in amusement as the archer noticeably flinched when Bruce approached. He shrunk back against the bumper of the vehicle at the frightening scowl on the other man's face and allowed him to check the injuries on his arm with little more than a grimace and a rather profound, albeit ineffective, pout. Natasha smirked knowingly at him.

"Boy is so whipped," Tony chuckled, popping back the pill. The water sliding down his throat did nothing to soothe the dryness and his chest tightened at the feeling. Pain laced up his neck and his body racked with coughs. He gagged as his mouth filled with blood, coated his tongue and teeth. Steve sent a worried glance his way and Tony recovered quickly, saluted with his water bottle and forced a smile. He waited until the soldier turned away before spitting out the earthy black ooze, grimacing in disgust.

Time crawled by in volatile waves of pain and nausea after that. Tony urged himself to calm down to better allow the medicine to kick in (half the dose this time, because God forbid he do something stupid again like try to convince Steve to elope with him when Thor wasn't looking), and slumped to the ground in a boneless heap next to the soldier, chuckling as Thor was dog-piled by a mass of shrieking children. Steve, a sleeping toddler in his arms and a young boy draped over his back, offered no help to the god's loud plights and instead laughed heartily and full, no more a grownup than the rest of them. Such sweet victories were rare for the team and they all contently basked in the moment, drinking it all in.

A boy, no older than five, wandered over to him then, white-faced and silent, but curious. He reached for the helmet and Tony surrendered it once he caught the boy's stare. Twin olive green irises made his heart flutter weakly in his chest with a dull twinge. When a trembling smile lifted his split lips, Tony pulled the kid into his lap and mussed up dark brown curls so much like his own until a quiet chuckle echoed through his tiny frame. Tony grinned as he studied the blank HUD screens, interested.

"Wanna see something cool?" he rasped, beaming. The boy nodded, eager, and Tony lifted the helmet. He angled the faceplate at where Thor was currently shrouded under a pile of giggling kids and then adjusted it until the entire scene was captured fully in Ironman's luminous eyes. "See the button on the side, over here? Push it."

The boy did as instructed, blinking in wonder when the sound of a camera went off. The captured image flickered briefly as the HUD came alive in a wash of blue. Steve glanced over at the noise, a smile tilting over his face when the boy in Tony's lap grasped the helmet in renewed awe, lined it back to Thor and pressed the camera button again.

"What're you doing?" Steve asked. Tony shrugged, smirking hugely.

"Hey, I got a God of Mischief to entertain. The God of Thunder getting taken out by kids a quarter his size? Priceless. I'm never letting him live this down."

Steve laughed at that and regarded the thunderer as he wrestled the children with an affectionate smile. "Nor I. Send me duplicates so I can hang them up in my living room?"

"Aye, aye, Captain. I like the way you think."

He stayed just long enough to make sure all the kids were safely relocated. After firm and not entirely untruthful reassurance to Steve that his health was holding, he took to the skies. Tony hovered in the air to watch Thor fly the soldier back to SHIELD, catching his breath at the sudden clenching in his chest. A wave of dizziness made his vision swim in and out of focus. Inhaling deeply and slowly, he waited until Thor and Steve had disappeared over the horizon before kicking
his suit into gear again. Rolling lazily through storm-lit clouds, he savored the indescribable feeling of flight, looping and twisting with each calm exhale he forced out.

The corner of his HUD screen flashed a warning in red numbers, steadily climbing with each lap he took around the city. Uncaring, he flew over the harbor, skidding his fingers over the firm surface of the water. The smell of oncoming rain mixed with the salt of the ocean below and he breathed it in, grinning as he rocketed straight up as though to chase the storm from the skies.

"Sir, there is an incoming call for you." Despite being nothing more than a computer, Jarvis managed to sound soft and sad, truly hesitant to disrupt the small measure of peace Tony had finally found. His AI's voice came from nowhere, his usual commentary silenced throughout the joyride. Perhaps he'd been far too focused on the toxicity count to have the heart to say anything witty. "SHEILD headquarters."

"And there's Pepper," Tony sighed in resignation, cutting off power in his legs and hands to allow a brief free fall. His stomach leapt into his throat as gravity once again took hold; the thrilling tremors rocked through his body and effectively shut his mind off from the pain. He reengaged the thrusters mere inches from the glassy surface of the ocean, spinning like a sideways top in a shower of water. "Patch her through, Jarvis. Maybe some sweet talk will sway her into not throwing me into the nearest hospital under lock and key."

"I wouldn't count on it, sir," Jarvis intoned dryly. Tony chuckled while he waited for the call to connect, pouncing the moment it did.

"So, I can totally explain the whole flying-in-my-suit-even-though-it-will-kill-me-faster-thing," he stated in a composed rush before Pepper could even have the chance to open her mouth. To his luck, the line remained utterly silent, giving him a few moments to prepare for the shitstorm to come.

"For your own sake, I pray you speak the truth."

The voice that filled his ears and sent his heart screaming into his brain was very decidedly not Pepper. His feet floundered in shock, scuffed the water and sent him tumbling. He shot upwards the moment he righted the suit, mouth agape.

"Loki?" Tony choked on a disbelieving laugh, caught hard between astonishment and overwhelming glee.

"That is the name I was bestowed with, yes." The god sounded rather amused at his surprise, though there was a dark hint of something underlying his voice that made the hairs on the back of Tony's neck stand up.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?" he smoothed over with a wide grin, falling into another skydive. The rush of adrenaline combined with Loki's deep tenor was doing wonderful things to his pain tolerance, and as he maneuvered a corkscrew spin around Lady Liberty, he could feel the physical agony slipping away like oil over water, unable to keep up with the speed and abounding elation coloring his world.

"Your machine seemed rather adamant I attempt to contact you, though why I can only guess."

"In my defense, you never really asked how the palladium poisoning worked," Tony pointed out. He
knew it was a stupid move but stated it anyway, pulling the suit into a backward loop. He heard an angry intake of breath and barreled through, eager to escape the approaching wrath by taking a turn he hoped would throw Loki off-kilter. "You're right though. I'm an idiot. I'm stupid and irresponsible and generally insane. But then, that's exactly what you like about me so much."

The silence was oppressive but thoughtful, as good a sign as any Tony could hope for, and with the ball officially in Loki's court, Tony fell into a final tailspin. He grazed the ocean, sliced the surface with his arm, and turned back towards home, slowing the replusors. The toxicity count was blinking at him rapidly, impossible to ignore any longer. The adrenaline high and sense of freedom he'd felt slowly dwindled to a fierce warmth in his chest, burning quietly under the poisonous flare of the arc reactor. He exhaled sullenly at the reality crash.

Perhaps he sensed his mood or perhaps it was something else entirely, but Loki shifted into a different position with a soft sound, the rustle of his tunic against the glass a familiar noise amidst the faint static. After a few deep breaths, everything suddenly closed off.

"It would seem my conversing with you is something to be discouraged," Loki clipped and Tony frowned at what he was implying. Only one thing could make the god sound so distant, and the image of Nick Fury standing in front of the cage like an overprotective father ushering his daughter on her first date did nothing to improve his mood. SHIELD really needed to learn to mind its own damn business.

"Fury, I'm dying right now because I just spent the last two hours saving the lives of a bunch of kids and nuns," he snapped into the line, knowing the Director and his entire department could hear him growling. "If I want to spend what could possibly be my last conscious night talking to one of your war criminals on a secure line without interference, then I really think I've earned it. Unless, of course, you think I'm just a treasonous sonofabitch who's somehow managed to magically concoct an escape plan with said war criminal even though you've listened in on all our conversations, then you're more than justified because that makes just a world of sense. We won't even mention the fact it will all end tomorrow when you free him."

The toxicity monitor beeped warningly; the numbers flashed bold and clear. He hovered over StarkTower, landing purposefully. His legs shook more with each step he took down the walkway as his suit pulled off of him. He shivered in the warm air, the smell of the incoming storm thick from such altitude.

"I'm quite the terrorist; wanting to talk to someone I actually give a damn about before I die."

The silence on the other end of the line was absolute. He snorted, loudly.

"That's what I thought… oh, and Pep? You have my permission to update the Captain on what's going on. All of it. Last thing I need on my conscience is Steve guilt-tripping himself into the nearest gutter."

After about a minute, he heard a faint, electronic click and smiled in satisfaction. Twirling once on his heels, Tony headed into the balcony room, stepping eagerly to the bar.

"Finally, a secure line," Tony smirked and poured a glass of Macallan. "Beginning to think they'd never leave, damn eavesdroppers." Loki hummed in response, obviously lost in thought. Proud of himself, Tony settled onto the lounge couch, teasing smile in place.

"So…" he drawled out, "what're you wearing?"

The incredulous hush that followed was just far too perfect. Tony swallowed a burning mouthful of
scotch to keep from laughing outright.

"...you know very well what my attire is Stark," Loki stated, a hint of amusement coming through. Tony chuckled, imagining just what expression the god was probably sporting at that moment. Icebreaker successful.

"Yeah, well, a guy can dream." He smiled and curled into the cushions, saturated in the comfortable quiet. His limbs felt numb and listless, body drained of energy as the medicine took full effect; his muscles relaxed one by one in a wave of relief no amount of alcohol could ever match. Fingers shifting the glass to make his drink swirl, Tony breathed a soft laugh. "I suppose you want answers."

"A preferable course, though I suppose your lies are enjoyable enough."

"Ouch," he tried to stop from snorting, but failed miserably, in far too good a mood to feel truly ashamed. "The Liesmith pissed off at being lied to? Got to hand it to you Loki, I couldn't have called that one."

Tony was starting to wonder just what the hell was going on when another silence fell over the god. He'd never been able to leave someone so speechless before, and Loki had always had a come back for just about every witty retort he had. This amount of quiet was worrisome, a feeling that didn't improve at what Loki murmured next.

"...I suppose it is strange for a liar to wish for something true. After all, I have given you no occasion to trust me in our time together. Shall I presume then that your words to the Director were merely a pleasant fiction?"

Way to hit a guy below the belt. Loki was actually asking Tony to trust him now? Just when had he fallen into the loony-bin? Tony felt thrown as he soaked in Loki's words, the faint tremor of his voice. He tried to pinpoint just what it was that was making his heart rate suddenly accelerate in that annoying way it did. Why he should matter at all to the god was a puzzle that challenged and stretched his intelligence to its furthest limits, a puzzle that did nothing but unravel him from the inside out. That alone was dumfounding to the highest degree.

With a rumble, the storm broke through the clouds, the rain releasing in a thick cascade. Tony's gaze shifted towards the sound, watched the water slide over the windows in forlorn, tumbling streams. The thunder rolled overhead, lightning zigzagging in a great flash of light. Bright and dynamic, just like Thor: overwhelming at times and so intense it cut straight through the present darkness. Such a contrast to the rain, the steady streams of water, remarkable and certain, just like all Tony had discovered of Loki.

A gentle thought occurred to him, murmured in his mind that maybe, just maybe, if Thor controlled the skies, perhaps Loki's magic was in the rain. It was certainly lonely enough. Nothing more than a random notion of no significance whatsoever, but it hit him hard. Even the drunken butterflies in his stomach settled low in a surprised flutter of wing beats as his heart tugged in a place the arc reactor could never pull it.

And then the truth finally puzzled itself out, and Tony nearly dropped his glass in the rush of astonishment that trembled up his spine.

"Loki... you're actually bothered by this, aren't you?"

The god hissed but denial never came, his own silence condemning him. Tony felt his breath hitch at the implication, feeling like Steve had just thrown him into another ice pool. Oddly touched and amazed beyond measure, he sipped at his scotch to calm the sudden shaking in his hands, studying
the patterns the rain made as it created music against the windows.

For the briefest of moments, he wondered just when his own life had come to matter so little to him in the face of a god who should have never come to matter so much. And then he wondered just when Loki had come to matter at all and why he was even considering detailing the ends and outs of his newest foolhardy play date with Death for him. He didn't owe Loki that or anything.

But it was the want to that was scaring him the most. And the way that treacherous little organ in his chest was beating so fiercely was more than a little troubling. Mouth suddenly dry, Tony raised his glass to his lips but couldn't take a drink and he shivered despite the warmth emanating through his house. He licked his lips and caught his reflection in the golden alcohol, wavering and pale.

Truth, huh?

Considering his record, he would screw this up eventually. The fallout would be fucking spectacular and the way he was going, it would be a long, hard road to recovery. Not to mention anything he said now could one day be used against him should Loki ever decide the life of a criminal met his fancy once again. Was it worth that? Was it worth the risk?

Was Loki really worth this?

"You asked me once what was killing me," he murmured softly, in tune with the chimes of the rain. He was surprised at the intentions lacing his own voice. "Do you remember what I said?"

Loki sounded just as rocked to the core by his tone as he was.

"What is keeping you alive," he whispered back, so close to verbatim Tony could only chuckle, remembering The Little Prince.

"That was the truth. There's an energy device in my chest, a magnet of sorts, keeping a clusterfuck of metal shards from entering my heart." Nervous at just how simply but heavy it came out, Tony twisted the glass in his hands. He lifted it eye level to catch the dim light in a kaleidoscope of color. "Usually it runs on a new, pure running element, but due to rather unfortunate circumstances I've been forced to revert to palladium."

To his credit, Loki caught on quickly.

"And this energy device powers that metal suit of yours."

"You got it."

Loki said something too quiet to catch. Tony found the low hum of his voice soothing and the fact it was soothing to be ridiculous enough to roll his eyes. He hadn't been this giddy since college and that alone was just embarrassing as hell.

"What heights has the poison achieved this time?" Ah, Loki to the rescue. He coughed awkwardly into his drink.

"Eighty-nine percent."

If the god was taken aback at all, he hid it well.

"Battling takes so much from you?" he asked quietly. Tony wondered if he supposed to hear it.

"It's just part of the job," he murmured, titling his head back. The resonance of the rain rolled over
him like a tide with Loki's voice on each cresting wave.

"You went into battle knowing it could mean your death."

Tony smirked at his tone. "Also in the job description. Fine print section."

And finally, a laugh. "You truly are a fool."

"Don't hear you complaining," he grinned in response, unable to help himself. To his amusement, Loki seemed content to humor him and didn't comment on his half-drunk-on-medicine flirtations. Sadly, he didn't reciprocate.

"So that glowing sphere on your chest is more than just decoration."

"Those eyes of yours will get you into trouble someday," he snarked in answer. Loki only chuckled softly. Something almost fractured entered his voice when he spoke again.

"Would you show it to me?"

So that's what was up, the million dollar question. Tony lifted his head slowly from the cushions, mulling his question over. A sharp jolt of... something cut deeply in a place he didn't know existed.

He'd shown the arc reactor to Bruce once as a thank you to Hulk for saving his life in the knowledge that the scientist's mind would be intrigued but he wouldn't pry unless Tony allowed it. Steve, being the leader, was also privy to what it looked like and how it worked, because the soldier in him had needed to know every variable going into battle in order to keep everyone safe, so learning the finer points to a piece of machinery keeping Tony alive had been high on the list of Steve's good leadership decorum. Bearing the arc reactor to the god when most of his own team had never gotten the privilege was ludicrous, but then again, none of his team had ever asked to see it, to study it with an open mind and endless questions. The others all just accepted it as a part of him they had to deal with, knowing if anything happened to it, Tony Stark was officially f*cked until a new one was put in. Loki on the other hand seemed hell bent to understand him, all his ins and outs, every detail hidden underneath his skin, and for some reason he was considering it, the serious hesitance in Loki's voice giving him pause.

No sense stopping now, Tony thought after a moment. Like every other aspect of their relationship thus far, he might as well dive into dangerous territory headfirst. It hadn't gone to shit quite yet. Tony tapped his fingers on his glass of scotch, wondering just how much of himself he was willing to give away.

"Face to face, alone," he compromised, challenge clear. Time to set the stage for the grand finale to end in either a standing ovation or a forced exit off stage right. "And only if you get me a drink first. Deal?"

Loki's smile was genuine enough; he felt it through the airwaves.

"I will hold you to that Stark."

The next morning, he was none too surprised when Thor called him on Steve's phone. His booming voice dripped with concern and far too much zeal that Tony had to yank his earpiece out and hold it at arms length to spare his eardrums the trauma. After assuring the thunderer he wasn't dead yet, the topic quickly shifted to Loki's release and Thor's overwhelming delight that Steve had allowed the two Asgardians to share his home for the remainder of their indefinite stay, brave bastard that he was.
Tony was sure Thor had called him in the hopes the news would cheer him up, since in Thor's world, everything that made him deliriously happy just had to be shared with everyone, so Tony managed to smile tiredly. He set the earpiece down on the armrest of the couch and snuggled back down into a miserable heap.

"I'm happy for you," he mumbled for the umpteenth time, shaking his head at the sight of the dark clouds still lacing the sky. The way the god was carrying on, it would be storming all week. At least the rain was relaxing.

After ten minutes of excited babbling Tony only half listened to, Thor ended the call with a cheery promise not to let the storm get out of hand and flood the city which made Tony laugh. In the silence that followed, Tony asked Jarvis to send the pictures he'd taken with his helmet to Steve's phone in the best quality possible, then call Pepper and put a rush on the shipment for the parts. Suicidal whims aside, he figured he should probably start focusing on saving his own life like he should've done weeks ago now that his reason for putting it off was no longer valid. Never mind the whirlpool of thoughts that drowned his brain and insistently whispered he'd taken his body too far off the brink this time that it was pointless to even attempt it.

"So," he muttered to the ceiling, "I guess it's over then?"

With the downpour of the rain and the dull throbbing in his head, it was almost possible to ignore just how depressing that thought really was when he tried hard enough.

Emphasis on tried.

It was still raining, although the downpour had trickled down into a soft haze, leaving swollen drops on every available surface that caught and glowed with the last rays of the setting sun. Standing against the window, the red hues that broke through the clouds set the dark brown of his irises alight, a small spark of life in his pale reflection. He attempted a shaky smile but only looked more exhausted and depressed, so just sighed and slumped on the glass, letting his forehead rest on the pane. It was warm from the passing storm and the added heat of his fever fogged the glass almost instantly. Tony pretended not to see it, gaze fixated on the horizon.

"I remember this room," Loki spoke from somewhere behind him. His footsteps materialized from nowhere.

"Funny. I remember you throwing me out this window," Tony snorted in return and the tilt of his mouth was more lopsided than it should've been when he forced it back up. If Loki noticed the way he trembled, the shaking state of his limbs, he chose to remain quiet as he headed towards the bar. The barely discernable sound of Loki's leather boots and the clanking of a glass stopper made him breathe a soft laugh but Tony didn't turn to look his way. Instead, he lifted a hand to the windowpane and met the stare of Loki's mirror image. "Help yourself."

Loki's face was unreadable and his heart began to pound, his fingers tapping nervous rhythms on the window. Oh, déjà vu. He remembered other things too, like how fun it had been to stump Loki with a dick joke so long ago, to offer him a drink and see the way his face had pinched with frustration because every threat he'd tried had just bounced right off of him. He remembered hitting Loki with a repulsor blast and then returning after the battle to find him crawling out of a Loki-shaped crater. The charming demeanor, the moment of uncertainty when the glow stick failed to work, the defeated but witty smile when he asked for that drink… man, had it really been two years?

A whisper of linen was all the warning he got before a hand slid over his shoulder, fingers pressing as though to urge him to turn. Fire erupted over his skin and he shivered at the touch, the first real
touch without a trace of animosity between them, the first contact without a wall. He couldn't stop his
breath from catching, utterly overwhelmed in the span of a painful second. It was like someone had
dropped a bomb on his head.

Loki lifted his hand away, brows furrowing, and studied his palm with a flicker of surprise as though
he too had been burned. It took everything in Tony to face him and look him in the eye, to keep his
voice steady.

"You really came," he said dumbly while it slowly sank in, wavering a bit on his feet. The weakness
in his legs was hitting a critical limit and he leaned heavily on the window to keep from falling. Loki
frowned and clasped his arm to steady him, causing another dizzying sensation that left Tony reeling.

"You doubted I would uphold our deal?" he murmured, offended. An almost hurt air surrounded
him.

"I think you do what you want, because you want to do it," Tony managed, proud his words didn't
waver. "I think everything you do is born from that. You do anything you want in the best way you
know how." Loki's eyes flashed in the light and Tony knew he'd hit at least one nail on the head
with that. A dim smile rose on his lips. "I guess I just didn't think you'd actually want to be here…"

He trailed off when Loki lifted the glass he'd been holding in pure offering and honest truce. Tony
stared for a moment, dumbfounded, and weakly took the drink – golden scotch, he noticed.

"So you may understand why I am here," Loki explained quietly. His eyes flickered over every
corner of Tony's expression, puzzling through it. Tony let out a shaky breath he didn't know he was
holding in and steeled himself for the courage to step away, to slide out from under Loki's touch.

"And that's all you want?" he tested tiredly, his shoulder brushing the god's as he shuffled past. He
forced down a twinge of disappointment with a brave gulp of the drink. "And here I was planning a
welcome home party. Balloons, pizza, cake… the whole shebang. Rhodey will skin me alive when I
tell him to cancel the fly by…"

His steps faltered from being immobile for so long and Loki was instantly at his side like a shadow,
seizing his elbow. It should've been frustrating, how easily Loki caught him, how easily Tony kept
falling, but the inferno those fingers stirred within him was far too potent to leave anything rational in
his head. His thoughts scrambled, lost as to why Loki kept insisting on touching him and leaving him
breathless (because, damn it, no one had the right to steal his breath like that). It was perplexing and
irritating on so many levels.

There had to be more than this, something inside whispered desperately. There had to be more to this
ending, more to this visit, a reason hidden under the obvious. And it was there, hovering between
each shared inhalation, elusive and stifling, a tentative star reflecting in a haze of green. He glanced
at Loki, confused by the unfamiliar shadows crossing his face, and turned to regard him fully. It took
a second for Loki to realize he was being scrutinized and release him, closed off.

Playing hard to get huh? Well, Tony could work with that.

"Palladium is a real harsh mistress," he muttered, shakily setting down his glass on the couch
cushion. Anticipation seeped into his bones at what he was about to do and for the first time that day,
Tony was thankful the fever made him sluggish as he pulled at the hem of his shirt. He had to fight
down an elated wave of nausea at the way Loki followed his every movement with the stare of a
hungry wolf. "You sure you want to see this? It's not gonna be pretty."

"You told me if I gave you a drink, you would reveal your glowing sphere to me," Loki reminded
him firmly and stepped into Tony's space. And then he was just suddenly everywhere, filling all of
Tony's senses in a rush of overpowering scent and sensation he couldn't back away, left to nearly
melt into a puddle of goo on the floor. Loki framed the arc reactor with his hands, pressed on his
chest. His palms were cool compared to the fever on Tony's skin and the heavy aroma of rain and
leather and something earthy drugged him helplessly in place. Loki too seemed to take him in with a
shallow breath: the feel of him, the smell of him, every facet of him no longer bound and separated
by glass.

"I would not have offered it otherwise," he whispered and the desire to see, to know in his tone was
unmistakable.

Stunned and lightheaded, body heavy and burning (and damn, he'd been right about the rain), Tony
gripped his shirt and eased it off. A deep, uncomfortable shudder clenched in his chest at the loss of
heat. The urge to cover up was quelled only when Loki's hands returned to their place, feeling over
the tender and inflamed seam of the arc reactor with awed fingers. He stepped in even closer until the
glow highlighted every feature of his face, shined in his eyes. The silver veins of palladium
branching out seemed to hold him spellbound and he traced them in wonder, brows furrowed in
contemplation.

Whatever secrets Loki hoped to read from his skin was a mystery to Tony, but it was clear that Loki
was searching for something, taking everything in with the same care and consideration he'd given to
the Eddas and to The Little Prince, trying to figure him out, to find the right way to understand. It
was mind blowing, flattering even, that he was a living, breathing puzzle for the God of Mischief,
and Tony chuckled at the thought, grinning genuinely for the first time that evening. He shook his
head in amusement, and amazement, and the floor tilted dangerously beneath him.

"Not all touches are free," he warned, wincing at a wave of queasiness that punched him hard in the
gut. He reached up to grip Loki's hands and pull them away but fell short. Instead, his trembling
fingers gripped tightly to the fabric covering the god's arms. When his body started to list to the side,
Loki mirrored his actions, grabbing his shoulders in a firm hold. Whatever the last few moments had
held for him fell away in an instant and he glared openly at Tony, cutting and sharp.

"You burn," he stated. Tony couldn't stop his eyes from rolling.

"Uh, still dying," he pointed out, swaying in Loki's arms. The god tensed and Tony looked at him
thoughtfully, sarcasm rising to counter the mild panic he was feeling. "You wouldn't happen to have
an ice pool on hand would you?"

Unfortunately for Tony, Loki wasn't in the mood to humor him anymore.

"Thor informed me of your plan to delay the shipment of machinery that can save you," he went for
the kill and he didn't bother hiding his reproach. "For a man held so highly by others, you give
yourself surprisingly little value."

There was a question nearly hidden in the throaty chords of his voice; an accusation and a demand to
know why laced the pitch. His words dropped in Tony's stomach like a pile of bricks, twisting his
insides into a spiral of ice, and he recoiled from Loki's touch. Stepping away with a stumble,
something inside of him started to shut down.

"See? Told you I'd disappoint you," he quipped and shouldered past, unflinching even though he
wondered why that had hurt so much. "If that surprises you, then I guess you really don't know me
at all."

Trying to walk proved to be just a bad idea all around and he collapsed heavily on his knees barely
five steps in, though he supposed Loki was partly to blame for it since it was the soft utterance of his name that had caused him to try to pause his dragging feet in the first place. Hissing through his teeth as agony tore through his core, the room spun rapidly above him. He swore loudly, not bothering to try and stand and humiliate himself further, knowing Loki would only get a kick out of it. So much for a smooth exit. Floor one, Tony zero.

He flopped onto his back with a groan and glared up at Loki when the god leaned over him, grin in place.

"Yeah, yeah," Tony huffed, "laugh it up."

"Oh I intend to," Loki smirked and stepped around him. He settled down on Tony's right side, but rather than laughing like Tony had been expecting, his expression turned distant. Tony frowned at him.

"What?" he bit out, on edge. Loki tilted his head.

"I underestimated just how capable of destruction you are," he said slowly, sounding rueful. "Particularly to yourself."

"Says the one with the warlord complex," Tony snorted back. It was a vague apology if he'd ever heard one, but considering it was from Loki, he accepted it with nothing more than a critical stare, knowing he'd get nothing more. Better to question why he'd gotten a hint of remorse at all. "Not all destructive forces are a bad thing. Not even yours."

"Oh?" Loki seemed far from certain. "Then tell me, Tony Stark, just how my capabilities of destruction can be turned for good."

At least he was willing to humor him once again, always a good sign. Tony didn't think he was in a stable enough mental state to take the god snapping at him for a second time, especially if it led to face planting on the floor.

"Well, for starters, that mind control thing? Save it for the really bad guys, the ones that threaten everything you care about. Make them walk off cliffs or something. And your magic? Well, I'm sure you learned to heal as well as you learned to blow shit up. You'd make protection spells badass, I'm sure of that. And you could harness it into energy sources, pure energy that powers buildings-"

"Or iron suits?" Loki intoned dryly, unconvinced but smiling. Tony chuckled at him.

"Save the iron suits for the guy who has to form science to his purposes. You got the brains and natural talent for it, lucky bastard." He blinked against the fever's fog, lifting a hand to rub away the haziness. Squinting when Loki's face blurred in the light, he swore again but gave up, massaging the throbbing in his temples. He groaned against the wave of heat that settled into his mind.

"That magical Smurf skin of yours would make for one hell of an icepack right about now… just sayin'."

It was the wrong to say. Loki's entire demeanor changed, tensing into a tight, lethal snarl of frightening calm and savagery, reminding Tony of the morning he'd questioned the god about his children. Poking around blindly and finally some dangerous ground at last. This was clearly a sore area meant to be prodded gently with his toes.

"Yeah, I know about the whole Jotun thing," he sighed, dismissive. He grimaced when the pounding in his head grew sharper. "Thor told me about it. Honestly I don't see what's so bad, but I know you won't believe me anyway, so just consider the part of me totally dying of fever right now the
mastermind behind all lapse of apparent reason."

Loki said nothing, frowning when Tony made air quotations with his fingers. He was staring with the upmost concentration at something in Tony's eyes, but what he was searching for, Tony couldn't say. For his part, he managed to stay mostly calm when Loki suddenly tilted over him, his hands on either side of his head, his body a solid and heavy weight against his ribs. Tony grunted at the impact, ignored the way his senses kicked on overdrive, and matched the god glare for glare.

"I guess that's a no to the Smurf skin," Tony sighed in the growing silence, thinking quickly. "If you don't mind then, this dying man needs an ice pool and there's a master bath two floors up with my name on it. You got what you came for right? You can go now."

He felt rather proud as he watched his flippant words hit Loki but pretended not to notice the way his face darkened. With nothing more than a cursory glance, Tony turned his attention to the ceiling.

"Hey, Jarvis? Would you call up the golden boys and ask one of them to come over? I need a strong pair of hands to get me to the tub… preferably Thor since he'll just make bad jokes about it and won't make me feel lame for asking."

"Delay that," Loki snapped before Jarvis could comply. Tony had to bite back a snicker at the evil eye that had been turned on him.

"What?" He feigned ignorance and Loki glowered hotly.

"You would dismiss me in favor of my brother?" he hissed, hackles rising like a wounded animal.

"Oh, so you wanted more than just to know about the 'glowing sphere'?' Tony grinned up at him, nonplused. "Why Loki, I didn't know you were so eager to help. Forgive me for assuming you didn't want to carry me to the bath." He slung his arms around the other's neck, his mirth rising at the look Loki was giving him, like he'd just turned the most grotesque shade of pink imaginable. Tony batted his eyelashes as innocently as he could, seizing the opportunity to be so annoying. "Ready when you are."

Loki stared down at him, his disbelief palpable. He rose slightly to slip from under Tony's arms, but Tony didn't loosen his hold and, amazingly, Loki allowed it.

"You should not be so accepting of a monster," the god all but whispered to him, brow arched. There was a challenge in his tone Tony didn't miss.

"I shouldn't be okay with having a hole in my chest," he countered, lifting his hands, "but hey, here we are."

A pathetic argument at best. He was asking a lot, he knew, but then, Loki had too. He'd wanted to see Tony at his most vulnerable and here he was, fevered and shirtless and sprawled on the floor with Loki more or less on top of him, too weak to fight back and without an escape route, the arc reactor bared and the poisoning on full display. Their relationship thus far had been give and take on both sides, and Tony couldn't deny the growing desire to see Loki at his most vulnerable as well. He wanted to come face to face with whatever monster Loki was convinced he would see, so he could find the way to proving him wrong. If the Jotun skin was Loki's kryptonite then so be it. He could only hope Loki held some degree of trust in him to allow him to try.

And all teasing aside, he really needed something to lower his temperature and even Loki knew it. This would either end with frozen blue skin or being carried upstairs to a tub full of ice cold water. Both possibilities would be epic, considering it would be Loki doing such things for him, so Tony
was more than content to wait for him to make his decision.

It felt like forever when Loki finally shifted. His gaze burned with an emotion Tony had no name for. Tony let him go slowly, his hands sliding over his shoulders, down his arms, and was surprised to feel the faintest of shivers tremble over the god. Then all the lights in the room dimmed; the temperature decreased with a speed none of Tony's advanced machinery could duplicate, and Tony could only smile when Loki leaned over him again, resting fully against his side. His weight was a strange comfort even though it effectively pinned him down, rendering him almost immobile. He was heavier than he looked.

"You are the first to ask this of me," was all Loki said when he changed from pale to the deepest, coldest hues of blue Tony had ever seen, green irises bleeding into a vivid red. He placed a hand over Tony's brow the moment he moved to speak and then Tony was lost. He moaned at the blissful cold and arched his face into Loki's palm like a content cat. His skin was beyond freezing and it cut through the fever like a knife, chasing away the pain so quickly it left him dizzy and disoriented and more than a little giggly. When Loki's other hand settled over his heart, a bubble of laughter arose at his touch.


Loki went rigid at his words and Tony chanced a peek at him, curious as to why he could suddenly feel the god's heartbeat accelerate into a fierce tattoo against his ribs. Loki's face was awash with emotion, unable to discern, but Tony had a feeling that whatever Loki had been expecting, it hadn't been his absolute excitement. Slightly wide eyes bore into his, the scarlet sharpening in response to what the god was thinking. Tony couldn't focus for long once the excitement of the moment passed and he truly looked at him, his attention quickly drawn to the markings scored into the skin on Loki's forehead and over his cheeks, trailing his chin. Fascinated, Tony lifted his hands but stilled when Loki flinched from him, heart rate galloping. He studied Tony with the most severe and uncertain stare he'd ever seen, but when he made no move to pull away or hex him into oblivion (though he looked close to doing so), Tony took the gamble with a leap of faith.

Loki breathed the faintest of gasps when his fingers smoothed the arches of his eyebrows, inched upward to trace the raised patterns on the freezing flesh. Curiosity peaked, Tony cupped Loki's face, puzzling over the markings that countered the stroke of his cheekbones with the pads of his thumbs, following them down over his jaw. It was like touching snow of the driest quality – like dry ice without the poisonous fumes. Loki's skin was firm and smooth under his palms and Tony reveled in the numbness. The Jotun skin was far more incredible than Tony had ever imagined. How Loki could detest such a curiosity was a mystery to him.

His brain was quickly becoming overwhelmed by the overload of sensation, but despite all the questions that rose with each new inch he explored, Tony couldn't find the strength to voice any of them. The god looked more and more bewildered as the minutes stretched on but Tony couldn't hold back. It was impossible. He knew Loki was reading him easily, no matter how surprised he was by this, and that made their silence speak far more than straightforward words could express. It was simply beyond language, beyond reason or time, the way it felt to cradle the face of Loki's nightmares in his hands, the way the frozen skin moved beneath his. Loki was by far one of the most beautiful puzzles he'd ever touched and he couldn't stop from smiling up at him, from covering those eyes to feel them flutter closed. He spread his fingers and flattened his palms to map out every feature, every facet and line and engrave it forever into his memory.

He didn't pause until he allowed his hands to slide to the unmoving line of Loki's mouth. Drunk on the moment, lost in the high, Tony traced the thinness of his lips in utter fixation, shivering at how easily they parted with a hitching breath, a snowstorm unfurling against his pores.
"Not all touches are free," Loki murmured into his skin. His voice was raw and hoarse as though he'd been screaming on the inside. Judging by the enthralled glow of his gaze, he probably had.

Tony smirked a little at his choice of words, increasingly aware of just how badly his hands were shaking; too weak to stay up any longer without some form of support. He let them fall and braced his arms against Loki's. His fingers drifted down the smooth column of the god's throat. The thin linen of his tunic slid away easily, allowing him to trace the collarbones hidden underneath.

"So it's true then," Tony whispered. His eyes trailed down the path his hands uncovered. "'Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.'"

Loki blinked slowly at him before the hint of a smile lifted his lips.

"'One sees clearly only with the heart,'" he recited back, a spark of amusement catching in the corners of his mouth. "I was beginning to wonder if you quoted none other but the Little Prince."

"The fox makes the best point," Tony shrugged. "Isn't that why you always quote him?"

Loki hummed in affirmation, shifting his weight. Tony scooted a bit to accommodate him and relaxed in the answering quiet. He smirked a bit when Loki tilted his head just enough for his fingertips to slide over his chin and closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of the cold as it seeped into his brain. He didn't open them again until the hum of magic filled his mind. At his inquiring look, the god only chuckled gently.

"You stated earlier that my powers would be beneficial for healing," he intoned with a smile. "With your fever so close to breaking, all pain will be focused here." The hand on Tony's heart moved to rest over the arc reactor, fingers glowing a brilliant green. Something unreadable sparked in his irises.

"...if I may?"

"...did you just offer me magical painkillers?" Tony filled in the blanks, taken aback.

"As you once offered me a balm for my healing wounds," Loki nodded, briefly touching his chest where the skin probably still smarted from the long exposure to the potent, flesh-burning venom he'd been subjugated to. Remembering the salve he'd made in Bruce's lab, Tony mulled over the offer, focusing on the feel of his magic and wondering if he could trust something that felt so dangerous, coiling under his skin like a thousand snakes. The fact Loki was suggesting to help him more was amazing enough, but he was even asking permission on top of that. Damn, when had Loki gotten so good at surprising him?

"We're just plowing through by leaps and bounds, aren't we?" he coughed out painfully. When Loki just stared at him, waiting, Tony knew he was slipping and sighed. He tightened his grip on the other's shoulders, uneasy. "All right Loki. But if I start turning the shades of the rainbow, I swear to God I will find a way to suck all the magic out of you so fast, you'll be playing Smurf for a week."

He could only hope Loki knew he meant it even if his hands were shaking when he clenched his eyes shut. Allowing the god's power to sweep over him completely, Tony gave in with all his might.

The air fled his lungs in a dizzying rush. He distantly heard Loki's voice somewhere above reminding him to breathe and sucked in air desperately through his teeth. The fever snapped, breaking free from him, and he could feel Loki guide him out of the haze. The thrumming of his magic curled about them both in a blanket of absolute reassurance. Agony rolled out of the arc reactor in a white-hot cascade and he arched off the floor, gasping. An arm slipped beneath his back, heaved him upwards, and his head pressed against something cold and solid. Tony held on for dear life as magic rushed into his chest, chasing the pain like foxes after chickens, twisting and coiling
with wild abandon. Loki's hand slowly moved back towards his heart, dragging a freezing trail of power in its wake. He jolted in surprise when the magic found the metal shards and wrapped about them to keep them from shifting any closer to the frantic organ as the last of the poison-induced fire was quenched.

A final sigh of release and the pain vanished into nothing more than a dull ache. Tony managed his first easy breath and the magic lifted away from him. His skin tingled under a layer of snowflakes. A final pulse of heat swelled under his temples and it was then he realized the coldness on his forehead was actually Loki's neck. He wasn't even ashamed when he buried his face underneath the god's jaw, loving the feel of the Jotun skin staving off the last remnant of the fever. He curled up into him, not caring he was more or less slumped in Loki's lap.

"So, that was kinda awesome," Tony lauded, drained. He could feel power rippling through the god again and pulled away slightly, offering up a weak protest when blue faded back to the pale grace he was used to. Loki seemed amused at his objections.

"Another time perhaps, when you do not shiver so."

Tony hadn't realized he even was shivering until he heard his own teeth chattering. He huffed as though offended but didn't move away, unable to deny how comfortable he was, as awkward as it was to be practically cuddling in the arms of a god. Now that the Jotun cold had faded, Loki was extremely warm, his earthy scent in every inhalation, his breath hot against his ear. It sent a whole new course of tremors down Tony's spine and it was terrifying just how much he was starting to love it.

Okay, whoa there Tony. Time to retreat.

"That magic of yours," he started with an awkward cough, easing back, "just how much did it show you?"

Sitting in Loki's personal bubble, not even the Liesmith could hide the worry from his gaze, and Tony had to wonder just how bad it was considering the speed his smile dipped downward.

"You will be dead by morning, if not comatose." Oh, well. There you go.

"Could be worse," Tony tried to laugh and shrugged, if only to baffle the god further by how frank he was being about it. Loki seemed not to share his opinion and a pensive light crossed over his face. After a moment, he raised a hand and pressed it to Tony's chest where the skin was still freezing, fingers curling in around his heart as though to trace the metal fragments hidden beneath. Tony's flesh burned in response.

"What is required to save you?" Loki asked when the silence had stretched for too long. His face was schooled into a perfect mask, but Tony could hear the careful way the god spoke, holding his voice in, trapping something down. From so close, he could see flecks of amber glowing in a myriad of emerald, the color heightened by whatever emotion Loki was keeping in chains. Tony shifted nearer, stared intently at the way dark lashes curled, swept over pale cheeks, and in the spans of a shared breath, his closeness got a reaction: the slight widening of eyes, a sharp inhalation, the faintest crack in a barricade of frozen cement.

"Why? Do you want to save me?" he whispered and let the dare show plainly on his face. Loki seemed vaguely uncomfortable with the way his question had been turned around, but Tony pressed on. Trying to read the god was like trying to read Braille with your toes; difficult, but not impossible once the pattern was unlocked and memorized. And looking into a wall of repressed emotion, Tony searched for the key to understanding, honest and smiling. "You never cease to surprise me."
And there it was: a flicker, a tick of light against the pupil, a smile in a dark sea. "As you never cease to irritate and confound me."

"Not sorry," Tony grinned wide. Loki breathed a shallow chuckle at him.

"Of that I am most certain."

Their laughter was a strange mix, low and even, hoarse around the edges but real. Tony regarded Loki closely when their mirth tapered off, wondering briefly if he was overstepping some line as he lifted his hands onto the god's shoulders once again, trying to find his feet.

"If you want to help then you need to understand how this thing works. First things first though… my ass is asleep and my legs are all tangled up in your clothes. Either scoot away or help me stand. Your choice."

Tony felt a bit like a petulant child and smirked at the way the other blinked at him. Loki settled his arms under Tony's with a long suffering sigh, shifting his weight forward and up. When Tony only gazed expectantly at him, he snorted once and stood, pulling Tony with him as easily as if he was a sack of feathers. Not anticipating being vertical so quickly, Tony clutched at him in surprise, choking on air. Hands wrapped around his waist, keeping him firmly in place and steadying his balance as he rocked on his heels.

"As I said," Loki said into his hair and there was something strange in the gravel of his voice. "Irritating and confounding."

Bodies pulled flush together, their height difference had never been as noticeable as it was just then. Mouth going dry, Tony tilted his back, puzzled at the odd look Loki was giving him.

"Yeah, still not sorry," he grit out, dizzy, and earned a soft smile for his troubles. Wiggling a bit once the room stopped spinning, he eased against Loki's arms, stepping back a careful step. The god hesitated for a second before loosening his hold, allowing Tony to shuffle about until his shoulder rested on Loki's chest.

Fighting another lightheaded spell, Tony fiddled with the arc reactor, sent a quick glance up to make sure Loki was paying attention, and twisted it, pulling it free. Muted horror and fascination warred for dominance over Loki's face when he held it up, the blue glow highlighting the room. His chest immediately tightened at the loss of the magnet and his heart started to pound painfully in place, each beat more pronounced and harder than the last. Undeterred, Tony showed Loki the best way to hold the reactor to allow it to open and expose the palladium core. He didn't miss the way those eyes flashed when it slid free, burnt and smoking.

"This is all that really needs to be replaced," Tony told him, ignoring how he could no longer control the way his fingers trembled. It was hard to grip the palladium disk, the thin edges hot as they pressed none too gently into his skin. Seeing his slight struggle, Loki's hand folded around his own. The god considered the core piece carefully, giving it a bold tap with a fingertip. His features were pinched, dark with emotion.

"To think this was inside of you," he mused, taking it all in as though the mere thought of it repulsed and astounded him. Tony just shrugged.

"I get that a lot," he said, shrugging, and stared hopefully at him. "You think your magic could duplicate this or something?"

"I am afraid not," Loki admitted, frowning crossly at the core. Tony sighed, hopes crushed. Typical.
"This element is unknown to me."

"Well, got any ideas?" He forced a smile. "Or do I need Jarvis to write down my Last Will and Testament?"

Loki’s eyes snapped to his with such intensity he was tempted to step away, but the pale fingers gripping his tightened their hold almost painfully, quelling the thought. The urge to wave off his own joke was also suppressed as Loki’s gaze slowly slid from his own, gliding back to the palladium. He studied it intently, brows furrowed in concentration. He looked almost uncertain, as though doubting himself or whatever it was he was deliberating over. Tony could only stare at him slack jawed, desperately lost on reasons why Loki would make such a tentative expression.

Feeling like a fisherman casting out into mucky water, Tony lifted his other hand to cover Loki’s and tilted his head to regard him better when the contact returned the other’s attention to him.

"This isn't the first time I've flirted with Death," he smirked, wondering why he was scrambling to wipe the dejection from the other's face. "I'll think of something, I always do. And if not, well… I guess I deserve it for dragging this out."

His words did little to soothe the god. If anything, the grip on his fingers only tensed. Frowning, Tony nudged Loki with his shoulder, not sure if the light that suddenly lit his eyes was a good thing or not.

Loki carefully untangled his hand from Tony’s and covered the open hole left by the reactor and then shifted to his heart. It actually skipped a beat at his touch, stilling them both. Tony wondered if he should remind Loki to keep breathing since a closer look at him proved the god had ceased to. A tense silence stretched on as the pained organ continued to palpate irregularly, each stuttering pulse causing a multitude of emotions to flicker across Loki’s features.

"It would be preferable to remove the base conflict at its source," he said then, pressing hard on the skin separating him from Tony’s heart.

"But you can’t remove the shards," he read in the flint of Loki’s eyes, bewildered at how okay he felt with acknowledging the newest elephant that had joined the herd in the room.

"No, I cannot," Loki admitted and it sounded like it cost him more than a little bit of pride to confess it. Tony tramped down on the odd feelings that rose up when their gazes caught.

"What's wrong then?" he asked the stupid question. Might as well. The direction their conversation had turned had him thrown for a loop. The god seemed equally off-kilter, unsure how to respond as he studied Tony’s face intently. A muscle in his jaw clenched when he slowly released his breath.

"I did not always fancy the life and gifts of a sorcerer," Loki told him, hesitant and searching. "I was raised to see magic as little more than a coward's shield. When I discovered I had the perchance for it, I refused to acknowledge it, rebelling against myself with every fiber of my being."

The words jumbled out, heavy and raw, like Loki had ripped them from the deepest part of his soul to offer them up still bleeding. He didn't offer up specifics. It was a long while before he spoke again, voice low with meaning and secrets long hidden.

"It was my mother who first taught me the benefits of healing magic," Loki let out in a deep exhale, confidence growing in the face of Tony’s open interest. "And it was she who showed me that my power had a strength all its own. However, it was the Allfather who showed me the benefits of having such power. He was disappointed when I asked to learn magic instead of fighting like my
brother. He wanted me to be strong through the sword just as Thor was, just as he had been, whereas I had come to see my strength lay within. I asked for the chance to prove myself and he settled a task upon me he believed to be impossible for a sorcerer so unlearned as I."

He smiled distantly, lost in a memory. Unconsciously, he pulled Tony closer.

"He too saw the benefits of turning my magic into an energy source. Taking me deep into the city, the Allfather brought me to the central heart of all power on Asgard. What he asked of me was seemed simple enough: to capture a falling star and harness its might with my hands. For an entire day, he told me, I must stabilize the star's energy and use it to power the core. Should I succeed, he would enable me to learn magic at my leisure."

"Wait a second here… so you're saying that you caught a falling star," Tony echoed, incredulous, "and held it for an entire day?" Even his brain was having trouble wrapping around that one. The power of the reacting gases and atomic energies alone as they compressed would've been overwhelming, let alone uncontrollable…

"Of course not," Loki told him simply, proud of himself. "I held it for three."

The declaration was honest enough and Tony gaped at him, open-mouthed like a fish, heightening the amusement on the god's face. Stunned speechless, he barely registered when Loki gently pried the arc reactor from his hands and slid the ruined palladium slate into place once again. It wasn't until he pushed it into his chest and the magnet jolted that Tony realized he was freely allowing the God of Mischief to handle the only thing keeping him from death, and that his former enemy had actually put it back in with the kind of care reserved for far more intimate understandings. Tony blinked up at him dumbly, body warming at the intent written in that emerald stare.

"You want to put a star in my chest," he reasoned, amazed at how sane he sounded even as he considered consenting to something so hilariously nuts. Loki didn't miss a beat.

"Yes."

"You want to put a star in my chest," he reiterated, hoping it would sound less crazy if he repeated himself. It wasn't working. "A star. In my chest. You."

"You doubt me?" Loki murmured, voice brittle as ice. Tony swallowed thickly, blood roaring in his ears.

"...is it sad to say I don't?" A strange feeling of guilt tangled up in his gut, not because he honestly meant it, but because he hadn't realized it sooner. Loki frowned in confusion at the declaration and the sharp shadows that darkened his face told Tony an explanation was needed, quickly. He gestured helplessly between them, floundering, trying to find the right words.

"It's just… Come on. This is you we're talking about here… You. Loki. Liesmith. Immortal sass master." Loki's eyebrow twitched at that one and Tony forced out a dry laugh, choked on it. "The last thing you should be offering is to save me… yet here we are. And I can only wonder, why? Don't get me wrong, I know I'm hot stuff and I'm flattered but… what could you possibly gain from my life?"

"Do not make the mistake that I share in your particular lack of self worth," the god snipped at him. Tony sent him a pointed look.

"Says the guy who threw me out of that particular window."

"It was appropriate. We were enemies then."
"Aren't we still?" Tony challenged. "Because I'm pretty sure I didn't get the memo stating otherwise." He glared long and hard when the god grew quiet. Loki's expression slanted oddly, dulling in the light. For the briefest second, hurt showed on his face, but then he shifted, shoulders straight, and a new resolve entered his gaze.

"Then who am I," he whispered, "that you assume so readily my desire for recompense?"

"Cut the bullshit," Tony shot back, weary. "Underneath all the lies, all the magic and insults, you're still a warrior. You know as well as I do that a life debt isn't something you can just brush off."

He lifted his hand expecting Loki to flinch away from him, but the taller man did not waver. He let out a shaky breath as his palm soaked in the other's warmth and tugged half-heartedly at the high collar of the god's green tunic. His fingers trailed upwards along the slender cords of Loki's neck, pausing only when he could feel the strong, rapid pulse beat against his fingertips.

"Just what is it you want from me?" Tony asked him. Loki inclined his head, his breath hot on Tony's wrist.

"I am not sure yet," he answered after a hesitant pause. Fractured light illuminated a distinct glow in his irises that Tony had never seen before. "But your trust would be an invaluable start."

Trust. Already, his brain scrambled for reasons not to allow Loki to turn him into his newest magic trick. And his heart rose to defy each rationality with surprising vehemence. Vertigo hit when his body went numb and weightless, and he leaned in, a weakness in his knees.

You are responsible forever for what you have tamed, the fox had warned the Little Prince. The words came to him, unbidden, and Tony gazed at Loki until everything else disappeared, wondering just how much of that sentiment held true. The past weeks they'd spent together swam in his vision, caught in his breath. No manner of excuses could counter the fact that he was falling headfirst into those eyes and as much as it terrified him to be so against reality, he was loving every second.

He had caused this, whatever it was that flowed so earnestly between them. There hadn't ever really been a choice, had there? Because he'd already decided to trust, to give in; he just couldn't deny it anymore. And he was tired of trying to.

"It's not like I have anything to lose." Heart in his throat, Tony flashed his bravest smile. "Fuck it. Beam me up Scotty. What do you need me to do?"

Wordless, Loki gazed down at him and then bent, sweeping Tony up into his arms. Ignoring his loud and colorful protests, the god carried him outside, his gaze to the skies. His face was a perfect mask and he did not flinch even when Tony shouted obscenities into his ear. The warm patter of rain against his face stilled Tony's objection to being held like a girl, but it was Loki's eyes that ultimately silenced him. They were vivid and glowing, vibrant with magic and purpose. They were smiling too, even though the god's lips were not tilted up to match, and any thoughts left in Tony's mind fled in a mad rush at the sight. With only a minor glare to convey his embarrassment and displeasure, Tony allowed himself to be laid out on the soaked cement of his balcony. The torrent of the storm seemed to turn and renew itself just for them and thunder boomed overhead, lightening flaring wildly.

Like a lamb to slaughter, came the unpleasant thought as Loki reached for the arc reactor and twisted it free. His magic swirled around them in a sun-kissed blizzard.

"What do I need to do?" Tony asked again, fighting panic. Loki cradled the reactor between his palms. The palladium came free and he discarded it with a quick flick of his wrist.

"Just focus on staying alive," was Loki's only command for him. "Close your eyes."
Tony waited for their gazes to match before doing as instructed. Stay alive? He wasn't even sure how he was supposed to do that. Steeling himself, he reached deep down to where he supposed his soul was and latched onto it with every last ounce of will he possessed.

There was pain, the heat of the storm and the flare of unearthly power, and then his fear gave way to fire.

When darkness came to claim him, he didn't know how to keep from falling.

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End of Part 4.

To be continued.
An ending - and beginning

Part 5

“The Little Prince went to look at the roses again.

‘You’re not at all like my rose. You’re nothing at all yet,’ he told them. ‘No one has tamed you and you haven’t tamed anyone. You’re the way my fox was. He was just a fox like a hundred thousand others. But I’ve made him my friend, and now he’s the only fox in all the world.’

And the roses were humbled.

‘You’re lovely, but you’re empty,’ he went on. ‘One couldn’t die for you. But my rose, all on her own, is more important than all of you together, since she’s the one I’ve watered. Since she’s the one I put under glass. Since she’s the one I sheltered behind a screen. Since she’s the one for whom I killed the caterpillars (except the two or three for butterflies). Since she’s the one I listened to when she complained, or when she boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing at all. Since she’s my rose.’”

~The Little Prince

It was, oddly enough, the taste that woke him. Each arc reactor before had had the same strange by-product, so it was nothing new. Tony rolled his tongue thoughtfully, squinting his eyes open. His first had tasted overwhelmingly of burnt eggs and rust, while the palladium took on the flavors of rhubarb pie and oozing copper. The new element was a kick of pure coconut topped with a generous dollop of iron but this, a sugar coating in the back of his throat, sickly sweet and bitter all at once, made him frown. Loki’s magic and star power apparently reduced to a shaving of pure metal inlaid with Lucky Charms. Who knew?

“…alrighty then,” he said warily, blinking in the intensity of the stars. It took him a moment to realize the storm had cleared, the only evidence it had ever been a few scattered clouds coupled with the hot smell of rain on the air and the drenched state of every available surface Tony could see, including himself. He shivered instinctively, expecting the aching twinge that had been growing the past weeks, but when no pain laced through his chest he frowned deeper, surprised.

It was then Loki came into focus, equally soaked. He looked like he’d been put through the ringer, more than once, exhaustion hinting in the wrinkles of his eye lids, the furrowed line of his brow. And he was saying Tony’s name, over and over again, the tone of his voice hinting at how many times the god had done so and how irritated he was becoming that Tony had yet to answer him.

Tony was still chewing thoughtfully at the funny aftertaste when Loki leaned over him and heaved a tired sigh at the face he made. Trying to think of something witty to say in the silence proved difficult as reality slid more and more into clearer focus. Tony soaked in the graceful chaos of Loki’s person, a half-assed joke about the sweetness on his tongue the best he could come up with before the magnet re-engaged and the arc reactor, with its brand new energy source, flickered to life.

And then, power kick.

“Oh hell yes!”

Hearty, incredulous laughter erupted from him. When the force of it failed to hurt, Tony laughed
even harder until his eyes watered and the only sounds he could make were incoherent, erratic syllables, made all the more so when Loki’s expression took a utterly hilarious turn. If he hadn’t felt so amazing, so alive and light in that moment, he probably would’ve believed himself to have gone as completely off the deep end as the god seemed to think he had. Not that he would’ve cared all that much either way. He was alive, he was breathing, and Loki looked more than a little pleased about it.

Not to mention there was a freaking star in his chest.

“I’m about three seconds away from declaring my undying love for you,” Tony huffed out like a complete idiot and lifted his head to see. A nightlight of white and blue greeted him and he traced the rim of the arc reactor with curious fingers, grinning stupidly when it immediately began to glow brighter in response to his touch. He had to bite back another round of ecstatic mirth when the light inside hummed at him, like a purring cat. In an odd way, it wasn’t even surprising. He fought blood-thirsty freaks and aliens for a living. Of course he would be the one who, out of all the stars in the universes, would get one with personality.

“Actually scratch that, because as of right now I’m seriously considering saying hello to this thing and that totally makes me Sailor Moon. I may have to punch you in the face to counter that.” Loki’s brow twitched and Tony shook his head, grinning so fiercely his cheekbones burned with the effort. “I can’t believe you really did it. I mean I can but God. A fucking star; this is awesome.”

Some of the weariness seemed to ease off of Loki at the exuberant praise, a softness settling over him in its place. With a short chuckle, he pressed down on Tony’s shoulders when he shifted to try to see the star better, a wordless insistence to stay down.

“Always in such a rush,” he snarked and the light that hit his eyes right then made him ridiculously attractive, which was just unfair. Or maybe that was only stardust lifting Tony’s heart sky high. He hoped so anyway. “I am pleased to hear my capabilities have exceeded your expectations.”

Unspoken laughter was warm in his voice and the almost affectionate tilt of his lips let Tony know they were quickly falling down the dangerous Path of No Return. And he didn’t care that they were. A warning bell went off somewhere in the back of his mind, cautioning if he didn’t get something rational into his brain and quickly, he would do something beyond stupid, such as kiss the smirk clean off Loki’s mouth like some rescued Disney princess. And that was becoming far more tempting than it should’ve been.

Sailor Moon indeed. Time to find some solid footing.

“Is it stable?” Tony asked, forcing his mind to business. The novelty of the moment was beginning to wear off as the gravity of the situation finally settled in. Fuzzy thoughts for sentient stars aside, there was a power source in his chest that he had no idea how to manage, or adapt, or work with, and that was enough to sober him up. Converting stars into energy was not something human science had conquered outside of solar power, which meant he was running blind with Loki the only one in control here.

Tony might be learning to trust the guy, sure, but two weeks playing nice didn’t change a person’s nature so easily, at least not in Tony’s experience. Loki was still a God destined to destroy the worlds, a known liar and deceiver newly freed from a punishment that definitely hadn’t endeared anyone to him. Being an object of Tony’s curiosity and desires didn’t mean Loki returned any of those feelings or gave them any credence. (His feelings didn’t count for much of anything to anyone if he was entirely honest; never had and probably never would anyway. Pepper was the closest he’d ever gotten and that still had managed to blow up in his face. He was kidding himself if he thought anything with Loki could possibly be any different.)
He tried not to let the small fear that the magic in his chest was some sort of back-stabbing, mind control spell show on his face, even if the calculated odds proved that if Loki wanted to betray him, he would have no finer opportunity than now. It didn’t help that if it was stable, and Loki had truly saved his life, Tony was now in serious debt with the God of Mischief who was deep in the middle of a grudge match with the universe. Debt he would have to pay, no matter the price. Loki owed him nothing after all; Tony owed him everything. Leverage was more dangerous than emotions on any given day.

He gave the core another experimental touch, delighted when it once again purred against his fingertips. Tony could feel the power in it, a swirling mass of energy somehow fitted neatly next to his heart, warm and comforting, a wonderful contrast to his thoughts. It was incredible to feel and he couldn’t make his smile fall, even with the uncertainty twisting his gut.

“Stars are individual,” Loki told him, voice soothing over his unease. He swiped a finger around Tony’s to make it glow a deep shade of blue. “This particular one should hold for nearly a month – a sufficient amount of time, I presume, for you to create a replacement.”

So, that meant Loki had actually saved his life… with no strings attached? A silence fell as he waited for more, but all the lines he’d been expecting Loki to say, about being bound to him by debt, by owing him whatever he wished, never came. When it became clear the god was content to sit there and study him, expectant, Tony let his head fall back onto the cement to regard him better, hard pressed to hide his growing wonder behind his best poker face.

“I hope you decided on something you want then,” he offered the opening carefully, voice even. “Best ask it now while I’m feeling especially generous.”

“Oh?” Loki tilted his head, a mischievous slant to the corners of his smile. “And if I choose to wait? After all, my hatred for my former home has yet to be sated. Having the almighty Man of Iron in my debt would prove… most entertaining.”

Playful sarcasm tone dripped off his every word, Tony’s ruse easily found and toyed with. Tony choked on a laugh at that and Loki’s smile grew more genuine, the brief wariness between them gone as fast as it had come. Two weeks dancing to their strange music and Loki had managed to see through him at last. The thought was disarming, the feeling of finally being seen wholly and completely both frightening and powerfully stirring. A pleasant burn lighted in his chest, his relief audible on his breath.

“No, I really need to give you something,” he grinned wide, “just for that. Consider it a bonus.”

Loki gazed down at him in open amusement, but Tony could see the interest lifting his mouth.

“And what could the great Tony Stark offer me?” He actually laughed, smug bastard.

“Don’t play me off so easily, you,” Tony scoffed, bumping his knee against Loki’s side. He crossed his arms and the star hummed happily against his skin. “I can be a generous asshole when I want to be. Ask and you shall receive. ‘Ask’ of course being the operative word here.”

He batted his lashes as annoyingly as possible and Loki chuckled, shifting backwards onto his heels. The last of the storm clouds were retreating finally, allowing the moonlight to fall fully on them, highlighting the water droplets on Loki’s cheek and adding a glowing sheen to his hair. It reminded Tony when he’d read through the Prose Edda, how it had referred to Loki as beautiful. With the way the light caught on every crevice of his outline, some part of Tony was inclined to agree, though he would die before ever admitting it. Loki stared at the skies with a soft, considering hum and Tony tried to follow where his gaze was, wondering just what Loki would even ask for… if he didn’t
choose to wait and drag this out, a real possibility since Tony would probably go mad wondering and they both knew it. Loki, egomaniac that he was, would get a kick out of that, he was sure. He had a feeling Loki enjoyed making him twitch.

As far as gifts and favors were concerned, it wasn’t as though he hadn’t thought about it. Pouring through the Eddas had risen more questions and ideas than he’d known what to do with, ideas that could potentially get him into a lot of trouble. Getting more or less obsessed with the God of Mischief hadn’t helped. Feelings and whether or not they even mattered and all that. It wasn’t like he was worried about turning heads. He wouldn’t be Tony Stark if he wasn’t willing to sound all of SHIELD’s alarms through one course of action or another. (Any chance to see that vein throb on Fury’s temple was worth taking, if only for the laughs.) It was more Loki’s reaction he was concerned with. And the possibility of inter-world war; always something to think about.

Tony studied Loki closely as an idea whispered in his mind, gauging Loki’s thoughts from the flicker of his eyes. His fingertips traced the surface of the reactor and the star pulsed brightly, encouraging him. If Loki noticed his staring, he didn’t acknowledge it, too busy counting stars. The small smile on his face and thoughtful look brought to mind the Little Prince and Tony couldn’t help but laugh under his breath at the mental image of Loki raking out miniature volcanoes on his own round bit of rock, somewhere in space. The rush of fondness that followed, as well as a swelling of something Very Dangerous in his chest, made his mind up for him. Whether or not Loki needed an example, proof his offer was genuine and unlimited, Loki was going to get one. He could at least do that much.

Before he could even think to stop, he took the gamble.

“Jörmungandr was sealed in one of Earth’s oceans right?” he asked, giving voice to the question that had bothered him the most and the longest, remembering the fates of Loki and his children from the Eddas. The genuine surprise on Loki’s expression spoke volumes and Tony reveled in it. He would’ve patted his own back if that were possible, unreasonably happy and proud that his perception of Loki as a good father stood correct. It would make dealing this out a lot easier on his conscience and far more rewarding the longer Loki kept gaping at him like that.

“I’m sure by scanning some of your magic I can figure out where he is based off the signature,” Tony told him with his most earnest I-may-just-be-planning-to-rule-the-world-and-you’re-welcome-to-join-the-party smile. “Supposing of course your brand of crazy is genetic. It might take awhile, but at least you won’t have to wonder anymore. Just no Earth-crushing. It’ll be hard enough getting SHIELD to keep from executing me on the spot for even considering releasing your son, so that whole earth destroying urge of his? No más. Considering my line of work, I’m sure there’s pills for that somewhere.”

“Stark,” Loki started then stopped, apparently stunned speechless. Tony took that as a good sign and plowed on.

“If you can get me onto Asgard, I can try to track down Narfi too,” he rambled, his enthusiasm kicking in as an influx of plans began playing out in his head. “Though I’m not sure about that one. I’d have better luck sneaking into the stables to steal Sleipnir for you. Take him out for a joyride or something. And if you wanted him here, I’ve got plenty of spots to hide him… come to think of it, Pepper has this really big greenhouse he’d get fat in. His brother would be a bit trickier, but if you know where Fenrir is, I could cook up a wicked set of chain cutters for you to use and a big box of dog-treats… he likes those doesn’t he? Or is he really a virgins-only kind of guy? Because that could get complicated, not gonna lie. Though we could just lure him out with Steve if we’re desperate enough —”
“Stark.”

“You know, now that I think about it, Hel would probably be easiest. I’d just have to convince Odin to give her some time off, or force visiting rights for you. As an Avenger, I have standing right? And I did sort of blow up the Chitauri single-handedly. That’s got to have won me some brownie points with Big Daddy –”

“Stark.”

“Holy shit that’s it!” Tony grabbed for Loki’s arms with flailing hands, dumbfounding the god further. Excitement thrummed wildly through him as the plots lined up into a solution so simple he wanted to scream. He settled for sitting up and laughing like the manic genius he was. “I’m an Avenger. I literally saved the planet. I defeated an army Asgard didn’t even know about. Do you know what that means?” He gave Loki a curt shake, wide-eyed. “That means Odin owes me one. Holy fuck! I might be able to get your kids released with a single word! HA!”

Loki seemed to be in various states of bewilderment and disbelief as Tony beamed at him, triumphant and way too proud to be healthy. Surprise fit him well though and Tony wiggled a bit in place, the star flickering from white to blue to white in the most gleeful color show Tony had ever seen.

“I need this in writing,” he grinned. Pepper would’ve said something witty regarding hot air and the size of his head if she could see him now. “One up on Big Thunder? Putting that on my résumé.”

“Anthony.”

There was an undeniable glimmer of resolve in Loki’s eyes, something over-bright and startling, emotions twisting his face too quickly to read. The effect of it was mildly unsettling, and as the weight of his own words – no, promises – hit him fully, Tony’s thought train crashed into a spectacular heap. Silence fell as that sharp gaze measured his honesty, counted his worth, calculated the possibility. He had a half second breath of panic, that he had crossed way over the Daddy line and there was no taking his words back, no playing it off. And wasn’t that just dandy? He’d meant every word and Loki knew it. They both did.

Well, damn. Seemed he was doomed to jump from one insane whimsy to the next, wasn’t he? He really wished he had a working Shut Up Filter. Open mouth, insert foot.

“…Loki –”

“You would really do that,” Loki cut across, voice full of glass and bleeding edges. It wasn’t exactly a question and it wavered on the brim of wonder and incredulity, mere millimeters from tipping over and shattering, as though the very thought of someone willing to help regain his paternal rights was the strangest thing he’d ever heard. And it probably was with the way Loki was staring at him like he was a damn saint. God, what a heartbreaker.

Like a dam breaking, relief and something Definitely Dangerous flooded him, drowning out the doubt in a rush of warmth. Their eyes locked and Tony felt his world tip forward, shifting on its axis, everything blurred under the glow of the star, until it was only the two of them lost together in planes of gray and blue. The piercing lines of disbelief and utter hope on the god’s face were doing nothing for Tony’s self control and he reached out to brush away a tendril of damp hair off Loki’s forehead, feeling himself soften at the contact, smiling his answer.

“Of course I would. Haven’t you heard? I’m actually a pretty decent human being.” Tony snorted at his own wit. “And who knows? I probably have a hidden talent for horse-thieving among my many
numerous gifts.”

Loki gave a low laugh and, after a soft exhale, something seemed to settle in him.

“Thank you Stark,” he murmured, lips quirked upwards, and Tony was quite sure that fire in his eyes had not been there before. It was good to see. “I will consider it.”

“Make sure you do,” Tony grinned back. Now that the openness of the moment was wearing down, he was becoming more and more aware of far more pressing matters, such as how close Loki actually was just then, how warm he was, how fucking good he smelled. His hands twitched involuntarily, aching to touch, until he realized his grip was still vice-like on the god, lost somewhere in his tunic. He couldn’t seem to find them anywhere. A brief alarm flared in response and, catching it, Loki’s mouth was already starting to stretch into a very amused angle. Tony willed himself to let go, salvage some bit of his dignity before it was too late, and glared at his fingers when they refused to obey, the traitors.

It wasn’t until a low chuckle lit up Loki’s eyes that Tony realized his ass was asleep, and the sheer familiarity in their positions born of two weeks’ worth of mornings pulled an answering laugh out of him as well. Oh, but they were dancing, weren’t they?

“Is this going to be a thing for us from now on?” he snarked. Shifting a bit to stretch some life back into his backside, he managed to extract one of his hands and held it forward, palm first, feeling for the barrier that was no longer there. A pleased spark thrilled through him when Loki answered him easily, matching their fingers together.

An electric zing fired through the nerve endings in his skin, shooting down his arm. The engineer part of him flinched out of instinct, expecting the pain and heat that usually accompanied getting zapped with a wire. Instead, a low burn lighted in the low of his stomach, warming him to his bones. It was the same as when Loki had touched him before, the first time on his shoulder. Even the faint surprise on the god’s face was no different.

“Either my life just turned into a cliché two-bit romance or your magic has a serious crush on me,” Tony remarked dryly, shivering at the sensation. Loki shook his head faintly, as curious about it as he felt.

“It has never reacted in such a way before.” They shared a look while his magic settled. The feeling receded and their palms connected again without incident. Loki blinked with the closest thing to a pout Tony had ever seen on him. And if that didn’t bring to mind embarrassing things like ‘cute’ and ‘unfairly handsome’ to all parties involved, he’d pawn Jarvis off to Clint.

“I’m flattered.” Tony forced his voice to even out, tone down the flirting, lest he make more of an ass of himself than he already had. Loki smiled a bit crookedly at that and rolled his eyes, and Tony knew that if he didn’t get the hell up and move away, the next few seconds were about to hit a critical stage of awkward he wasn’t too keen on exploring.

Let it never be said Tony Stark didn’t own a shred of tact.

“I can’t feel my ass.” Not his smoothest line ever, but whatever got the job done. “Any chance of us taking this inside? You know, where it’s dry and there’s blankets? And a very comfy couch?” And a whole armory of booze with his name on it.

Loki obligingly shifted away, giving him ample room to try and find his feet again. His knee gave a twinge and he frowned at it, but managed to get his legs under him without tipping over, which he considered a win. Rolling his shoulders, he gave his body an experimental twist, and grinned when
the star hummed gleefully at him.

The happy little light distracted him just long enough for two strong arms to get around and under him, and before he could even protest about it, he was in the air and Loki was walking them back towards his penthouse lounge as nonchalant as you please, looking more than a little smug about it, asshole.

“Is this really necessary?” He did not yelp just then, thank you very much. Tony turned his most impressive scowl on the god but Loki only smirked wider at him before assuring him that yes, yes it was with what had to be the most infuriatingly beautiful smile in his arsenal.

“You think you’re so funny,” Tony muttered and crossed his arms. When Loki threw his head back and laughed, he figured his man-card could’ve been up for forfeit for much worse.

But that still didn’t mean he had to be happy about it.

Or go quietly.

He was halfway down a bottle of scotch when he realized he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

The revelation came all at once and unprovoked, in the middle of an hour full of small talk and a rather amusing argument about the merits of star power as opposed to solar energy. Tony only really noticed at all when Loki’s eyes drifted over his chest and stayed for longer than was strictly necessary, but upon glancing stupidly downwards to see what the matter was, the sheen of his own skin was like a shovel to the face. Even the star bubbled as he fumbled with his drink, laughing at him.

He’d never been self-conscious by nature, one of the perks of being a billionaire blessed with classically dark features surrounded almost daily by overly beautiful people vying for his attention, but seeing the way Loki was taking in every eyeful of Tony he could get, face impassive and unreadable, only made him squirm in place, itching for a shirt.

All his clothes were two floors up and he was suddenly faced with the fear that leaving the couch they were sharing would prompt Loki to disappear. It struck him for the first time just how slippery the god was, how hard to hold on to. An odd thought, considering Loki seemed in no hurry to leave his small throne of pillows, but as Tony watched him twirl his own glass, knock back the drink with a flash of pale throat, each movement he made a study in casual, lazy grace, Tony began to wonder just how the hell he could have ever thought it was even possible to keep Loki there, on his couch, in his home, in his life.

The God of Mischief, who hated practically the entire universe, was now free. Free to come and go and destroy as much as he pleased. Loki was a dark horse, a wild card, a god of vengeance with a smile worth a thousand secrets. Mischief and malice all in one. No matter what Tony wished for, or said, or offered, Loki would do what he wanted, whenever he wanted, however he wanted, with whomever he wanted. And Tony had no say, no leverage to stay on page, no bid to play. Rather pathetic all things considered.

Oddly perturbed by the thought and unwilling to risk it, Tony settled for pulling a blanket around his shoulders and snuggling into the couch, half for the comfort of it, half to keep grounded. He purposely kept the arc reactor within easy sight, figuring the constantly flickering light was the only linchpin he had left to bait Loki’s interest. That and a life-debt. When Loki’s consideration had come to mean so much, he didn’t know. Didn’t want to know, really.
“You’re gonna have to get me into the secret of this star power thing,” was his attempt to steer back to somewhere broaching normal. And considering having a star in his chest was now his new normal, it was all he could do not to grab the scotch bottle from the coffee table and attempt to drown in it. It was bad enough being carted around like some new bride by a god he may or may not have a serious case of the stupids for. Coupling that with the fact his very straight arrow of sexuality had veered rather spectacularly off course during recent weeks, Tony found himself finishing off his glass with vehemence in silent protest against the idiocy of his own desires. He didn’t quite know how this was his life.

Heedless to his internal screaming, Loki reached for the scotch and refilled his drink to a generous line. When Tony frowned at him, he smirked around a mouthful and set the bottle back down, decidedly out of reach.

“Rude,” Tony pouted, a funny buzz in his ears. “Shockingly rude.” Loki just smiled, cat-like and predatory, eye’s sparking in the faint light.

“I would have answers from you,” he declared after a moment, apposite of nothing, and sat forward from his corner in the cushions, contemplating him on the edge of his personal bubble. Tony blinked rapidly while he processed that, unsure how to respond for a few breaths.

“Bit random for you, but I’ll roll with it…?” He managed to sound calm at least. Mostly calm.

A weird quiet stretched between them as Loki watched him, probably making sure he wasn’t going to randomly jump out the nearest window screaming. Tony would be lying if he said the thought hadn’t crossed his mind (been there, done that anyway), but he forced his body to relax all the same. It was undeniably comfy slotted in the corner of the couch like he was, and with the added warmth of alcohol in his bloodstream, moving was becoming less appealing by the second. He worked out his nerves by fiddling with the hem of the blanket, fingers drumming odd patterns on his empty glass.

He gave the bottle a despairing glance but otherwise made no move towards it, something the other took in with a knowing look.

The smile slowly fell away from his mouth and Loki dropped his gaze to the arc reactor, voice low with intent.

“If I had not come to you this night, it is highly probably you would not have lived to see the morning. Perhaps comatose by some earthly miracle, but likewise indisposed to save yourself.” Tony’s grip tightened on his glass but he very carefully did not react further. It wasn’t exactly news to him, though hearing it out loud had a bite to it he hadn’t expected. Or maybe it was just the source that jolted him. Humming lowly, he swallowed hard, a sudden lump in his throat. The green of those irises seemed impossibly dark, pinpricks of light flaring blue across his pupils.

“You are not surprised,” Loki stated, flat and dangerous. Tony only shrugged in response.

“What do you want me to say?” he couldn’t help asking, jaw clenching defensively. “I’m probably the stupidest smart person this side of the cosmos. This shouldn’t be news to you. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s not. Otherwise you wouldn’t be glaring at me like I stole all your candy or something.”

He hadn’t been aiming to push buttons, but Tony had a natural talent for it, and when the lights suddenly went out, the shine in that glare flickering, he knew he’d royally fucked things up without even trying. Somehow.

Tony tapped the star to make it glow brighter and it happily complied, picking up a brilliant silver-white to highlight the room. The glow it drew over Loki’s outline did nothing to settle his nerves, and as his protective barriers rose to the vanguard, he slowly stretched for the table with his glass,
“Care to explain to me why you give a damn?” Tony bit out, desperate to get a word in edge-wise before the oncoming shitstorm had a chance to blow his way. If Loki wanted to pick a fight, he was in for a rude surprise.

“I saved your life,” the god snapped back, wholly unimpressed. “That is explanation enough.”

“Is it now?” he chuckled without humor, sinking more fully into his blanket, smothering the starlight. “News to me.”

His words hovered over them far longer than he’d expected them to. The hair on his arms and neck rose in the deafening silence he’d garnered and he tucked in against a sudden chill. Then he heard the shifting of fabric, the sigh of a body, and then Loki was suddenly just there, sharing his space, a solid weight against his drawn up knees.

“Still do not trust me, Stark?” A fingertip traced up the line of his jugular; a promise, a dare. Even in the haze of dark, Tony could feel his razorblade smile and answered with one of his own.

“I trust you to be you,” he admitted and wondered why his voice had softened, despite the cold dread tightening in his chest. The hand against his windpipe stilled and Tony leaned into it with a dare of his own. “I’m just not sure where I fit.”

“A truth for a truth, from the God of Lies.” Loki breathed out in a strangled release of tension, breath hot against his mouth. Confused and on edge as he was, Tony knew that all he had to do was tilt forward just so and he could steal the moment and hold it in the crease of their lips. A heady idea that made the air catch in his lungs. “Never have I believed a soul could exist so like my own.”

The palm over his heart was unexpected and Tony stopped breathing as fingers splayed over his skin.

“You will ruin me, Tony Stark,” Loki whispered somewhere behind his ear, voice thick with ghosts. “By the Nine, you will break me open in my own obsession, little more than a tamed fox waiting upon the hours. That is how you ‘fit.’” Tony smiled when he caught the reference, ducking his head with a breathless exhale. A shoulder was there to catch him and he pressed his forehead into the folds of Loki’s tunic, dizzy on the smells that wafted in his wake. Fingers wrapped around his elbow, securing him in place.

“I would have answers from you,” Loki said again, resolute, mouthing the words into his neck. “And one way or another, know that I will have them.”

“Only if I get a guarantee on the same thing,” he murmured in return. “Because honestly, I’m still waiting for the punch line.”

“You believe this all a jest?” Loki’s grip tightened on him, unmovable. “This is no trick, Stark.”

There were about a thousand things Tony wanted to say to that, but nothing rational was willing to come because Loki was suddenly holding him as though Tony were the one impossible to hold on to, not the other way around. Tony wasn’t sure just what Loki was expecting or how to react, but his heartbeat was firm and strong against his temple, stirring his thoughts to its rhythm, willing Tony to trust his words, even though they were crafted by a Liesmith. He was utterly lost like this, unable to understand how they’d even gotten into this position, or how to untangle them out of it. If he even wanted to.

A shiver shot down his spine. Taking steadying fistfuls of blanket, Tony slowly tilted his head to
catch Loki’s gaze and took a leap of faith.

“You want to know why I was willingly killing myself, because I was more interested about my time with you,” he offered. A flicker in his eyes let Tony know he’d guessed correctly. “All right. Short, short version then: I’m stupid. And we already know that. Even shorter version: it’s got nothing to do with you.”

He shifted backwards before Loki could protest and Tony met him stare for stare, determined that if he was really going to do this, sober, then the god needed to understand the sheer breadth of honesty he was going to give him in this moment, a sacrifice. He could feel his stomach drop away, fear like ice in his veins, making him shake. Alarms were going off in his head, shouting reasons as to why this was a terrible idea, that he was about to ruin everything. True to form, he ignored them all, set his jaw and took the plunge.

“Full story… I’m fucking tired.” Once the words were out, it was like he’d ripped something vital inside, something heavy and buried deep. It left him out of breath, like a sucker-punch to the gut. Tony twisted into Loki’s grip on him, needing an anchor to keep him grounded as he tried to give voice to the reasons he had never been able to understand. “The truth is, it’s like… it’s like I’m not afraid anymore. Can you believe that? I put my life on the line nearly every day for this city, for my team, and I’m not even afraid. Like fuck. Do you know what that means?”

He had to pry his fingers out of the blanket, knuckles white. Tony snorted harshly at that, staring down at them in morbid fascination.

“It means I don’t care anymore. I don’t care. Disappear in a cloud of smoke? Poof. At least I went up in flame and glory. Splattered against the sidewalk? Konk, ker-splat: Iron pancake. I won’t give two shits either way.”

Hands, cool and firm against his face, forcing his gaze back up. He blinked hard at the sudden burning he felt, staring unseeingly at the darkened ceiling, and there was just something about the gesture that cause the dam to break, and abruptly it came pouring out of him in a rush of emotion.

“Stark,” Loki murmured and Tony dredged up a bitter laugh for him, shaking his head.

“I mean really,” he plowed on before Loki could stop him, “who the hell decided it would be a brilliant idea to let me be a hero when I couldn’t care less about myself? Because I’m Tony Stark? An Avenger? Because fate or destiny determined I am just better? Bullshit. I’m not better, I’m alone. And you know what happens when I’m alone for too long? I get curious. And when I’m curious, I get stupid, and I get reckless. But you know all about that, don’t you?”

It was coming back to him, the last time he’d allowed himself to fall apart like this. It had been over a year ago, and Pepper had been easier to hold on to, a perfect fit in his arms. Her dark eyes on him, the way she’d smiled so lovingly at him, letting him know it was perfectly all right to be human, to be flawed, to be himself. It was almost odd now to be staring into green depths looking for the same understanding, the lines blurring every which way in the dark, the hazy glow of the star switching from blue to white. It colored them both a sickly pale, but could not hide the surprise written in every line of the god. Tony closed his eyes and leaned into the touch cradling him like a starving man, giving in to a tired smile.

“Do you know why I became Iron Man in the first place? Most would say vanity, or because I wanted to. Only I knew that by putting on that armor, I could find my true self, a real purpose. A chance to do real good in this world, leave my mark. Now, I put on that armor because I can not care enough to get the job done. I can do the bad things, the hard jobs, because I can keep my personal shit out of it. Tony Stark, fuelled by math and science, self-sacrifice for the greater good. Sounds
great on paper, I imagine. But really, what the hell is so good about being practically suicidal? Why do people praise me for it? Is this the kind of hero people want me to be? Someone who can’t even function with his own emotions? Is this Tony Stark what they all expect and need?”

Tony grabbed Loki’s wrists, matched his stare once again, tried to find his breath. Sighed at the sheer madness of it all.

“Even if I believed in things like fate or destiny like you… I know this isn’t what I’m meant to be. I don’t want to be this. I can’t be this. This life is mine. I carved it for myself. Every road I have walked, everything that I’ve done was because of choices I made. My ideas, my screw ups. That’s why I don’t care, because all I can think now is, what gives them the right to force me to be like this? Hell, what gives me the right to even protest this? Maybe I’m wrong and the greater good is worth being alone…”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” Loki told him. “But I do not see how it would be worth your life. These past weeks you have deliberately tried to die with no opposition, no greater good to reason it away. Even if the heroic path has overtaxed you, it cannot be your excuse for this.” He leaned in closer, pupils fully dilated in thought. “Explain Stark, why death is your preferred course?”

“It’s not,” Tony defended quickly, before his brain could catch up. “It’s not… huh. Not really.” He sighed deeply when Loki just stared at him, expression saying quite clearly that the god believed to have caught him in a circle of his own stupid. Tony pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, cursing under his breath. “It’s just. Flirting with death, okay? No opposition. Just me and a choice, my choice. Not as a hero, but just as me, myself, and I. I needed to know that I could still do that. Choose, I mean. That my own death, my own choices did not just ride on Iron Man, or the Avengers, or this city, or anyone the fuck else. I needed to know that I could still be selfish, because I am selfish. I’m the most selfish bastard on the face of this planet. And people have forgotten this. Yes, I took it too far. What I did wasn’t fair for others. But I didn’t do it for my team, or for this city. There’s a reason I’m not a team player, because one day there will be a standard I cannot maintain, an expectation I cannot meet. And what the hell am I supposed to do when that standard is my own self? People slapped the hero label on the worst person possible.”

He let his hands drop and slowly pulled Loki’s fingers away from his face, dropping them onto the arc reactor, over the skin still bruised from where the palladium had wrought havoc, the still fading roads of silver ruin branching outward to kill his brain, his heart. Tony’s tongue felt like lead, the words awkward and heavy in his mouth, and willed the other to understand, even though it was worthless, that what he felt meant nothing, just simple facts that weren’t even simple, pieces to a puzzle. Answers to a question.

“What the hell am I doing? Why am I so frank about death? I can’t even break even with my own suit, okay? What Iron Man is expected to do is something I’m afraid can’t do anymore. So I just… I needed to remind myself that I was still human, still me. Before I can no longer live up to my own creation. That the Tony Stark that belonged in that suit isn’t actually gone for good. I needed to make sure he still existed somewhere, that I could still be me.”

Hearing the words, he could only laugh, drown out the sound of his own voice.

“God, I’m certifiable.”

“And stupid,” Loki inserted in and Tony couldn’t even refute that, just smiled and looked away, wondering not for the first time what the hell he was doing and why he couldn’t shut his emotions off completely like everyone thought he was capable of doing. Life would be so much easier if he was just a brain without a heart, schematics and ratios instead of expectations and standards, regrets and failures.
“Maybe one of these days I’ll build a legion of Iron Men who can fly and fight and follow orders and be perfect. Rogers would cry I think. He could finally have the soldiers he deserves.”

“You give the Captain too little credit,” Loki said in a surprising defense of Steve. Tony raised an eyebrow at him, gaping, wondering if he had somehow misheard. Loki just shrugged, clearly in a loop Tony didn’t even know was there, and continued on with his weird. “He is not so blind once pointed in the right course of action at the very least. Especially if it’s made painfully apparent to him.”

“…that is so far left field I don’t even—”

“My brother wishes to court him, properly.” Without preamble or context, Loki still looked rather smug about it. “If the pause in rainfall is to be any indication – as well as my personal knowledge of the fool, sad as it may be – the good Captain has finally given him an answer after far too long dancing away from the issue. That or Thor is simply dead, which would also allude to the end of the storm and its subsequent precipitation. Either case, a positive outcome, wouldn’t you say?”

Tony couldn’t help it. There was a beat of dead silence, then the dry tone coupled with the arrogant tilt of Loki’s mouth had a bark of laughter trembling out of him before he could swallow it down, and then he was chuckling for real, helplessly, while Loki pinned him with an affronted look, which only set him off more. It was inappropriate, and so off topic Tony was sure he had whiplash from how quickly the subject had changed, but then Tony’s mirth began to die down and Loki finally grinned wide, all sharp teeth and thin lips, so very pleased with himself, and it all made sense.

Tony shook his head, not quite sure what the hell that had been, but ridiculously happy Loki had played such a stupid card to cheer him up, even if it probably meant he’d had no idea how to deal with Tony’s angst any more than Tony had. He’d probably gotten desperate and took the first opening he could, disguising his unease with his trademark charm. But Tony knew, somehow, in the odd way Loki had done it, that he’d still been understood. It wasn’t a solution, no, but it was a step in the right direction, a good foot forward. And that left him feeling inarguably lighter than he’d felt in a long, long while.

But, still. “That is the stupidest - why the hell am I laughing at that?”

Loki’s hands slowly drifted off his chest, tracing his ribcage, feather-light over where his sides were most sensitive. Tony flinched in surprise and Loki immediately firmed his hold, his gaze tracing down the path his touch had just formed.

“Because I know you,” he stated, and there was more than a few secrets hanging on his words, in the sing-song quality of his voice. He smiled down at the arc of his fingers over the flat of Tony’s stomach. When his gaze shifted back, all of Tony froze, like a rabbit caught in a snare. “More than you believe I do.”

He could feel the hair on his neck begin to stand on end once again, a shiver traveling down the length of his torso. Any pretenses he could’ve made fell away to nothing when Loki leaned in, easily breaking through the barrier of his legs, eyes almost over-bright under lit by the star.

“There is something you have yet to guess of my magic, Stark,” Loki told him plainly, clearly enjoying having one over on him.

“Uh… it actually has a crush on me?” He couldn’t quite keep a note of panic out of his voice. Loki smirked when he caught it and continued impossibly closer until Tony was all but scrambling back into his corner of the couch, the god a heavy weight pressing him down.
“I suppose that is one way of looking at it.”

“...you’re serious?”

“My magic is sentient,” Loki huffed at him, like he totally wasn’t almost completely on top of him now, like it was perfectly normal to stretch over Tony like a cat who wanted attention… which probably wasn’t too far from the truth, come to think of it. Out of the two of them, Loki would be the only one singled out as the bat-shit crazy guy with a thousand cats. “As much as it is a part of me, I am also a part of it; two beings working in tandem. Most of my magic and tricks were a gift from my mother, who taught me everything I know. But some of it, the more… chaotic fragments, I inherited through the unfortunate circumstances of my true lineage.”

Tony processed that as best he could, which was a feat in itself considering the way Loki was looming above him like that. “…so just your Smurf side wants in my pants, then? Which is totally cool with me, by the way. Just so we’re clear.”

“Your attempt at wit does you no favors, Stark. And you are missing the point.” Loki accentuated this by pressing his palms back over Tony’s chest, pushing him all the way down onto the arm of the chair. “This side of my magic has the innate ability to sense the vague impressions of emotion, though I do not understand the need those monsters may have in this gift, nor do I hold any desire to find out.”

“Wait,” Tony swallowed thickly, hands scrabbling for purchase on Loki’s shoulders, keeping him from closing the last of the distance. He could feel the snow wind of power rolling gently over his skin and felt the familiar zing tingle down his arm. “Is that why it keeps zapping us? Because your inner Frost Giant totally has the hots for me? Oh, hell yes. This is now my new favorite thing. The rest of you can go home now.”

Loki sighed and rolled his eyes, clearly unimpressed with his use of puns. “Don’t be obtuse.”

“Did you just use a math word?” Tony gaped at him.

“I have just told you my magic can read your emotions Stark,” Loki countered with a Look that told Tony he was, once again, missing the point. A very, very important point. “Are you even going to venture into how I accomplish this?”

Oh, well. That got his attention. Tony snapped his gaze to match Loki’s, interest peaked, glancing around briefly as though some device had magically appeared somewhere under his tunic or on his belt that held the answer. Until he noticed the truly wicked curl hiding on the edges of his smile as Loki flexed his hands over his skin… his bare skin, fingers digging hard into the muscles beneath.

And then it clicked, and Tony was an idiot, because that was obvious, even by his standards, and he couldn’t help the way the blood rushed to his face once it all sank in, flushing down his neck and shoulders.

“Would you like to know what you’re thinking?” Loki purred at him and Tony’s mouth went completely dry when he realized all that implied, what the god intended on doing, what the whole point of this had been. And then the god was pushing past his grappling hands before his mind could recover, as graceful as a snake, and a warm mouth closed over his, confident and eager. Tony gasped at the contact and Loki slid his lips easily over the gap, breathing him in with a devilish smirk.

Like an over-heated wire on a circuit board, Tony’s brain went up in smoke. He arched up into the kiss, sliding his hands into dark locks of hair, raking his fingernails against Loki’s scalp, until a soft moan escaped the god for his efforts. Possessive fingers slid down his sides, gripping painfully tight into his skin as he tilted Loki’s head just so for better access to his mouth. Tony responded with just
as much demand, urging their bodies to pull flush together, Loki sliding up and up until his long legs were straddling Tony’s waist, the full weight of him pressing Tony fully against the pillows. He rocked his hips upward, drawing gasps from the both of them because goddamn, he hadn’t even realized just how much he’d wanted this until now and he’d be damned if he lost his chance. Not that Loki seemed to mind much, canting his body forward in response with a breathless laugh, biting down on his lower lip appreciatively until it was kiss swollen and red, his own lips bearing Tony’s imprints.

When Loki finally pulled back, Tony was panting and stunned, because that had actually fucking happened and the bedroom eyes he was getting were making the drunk butterflies in his stomach spontaneously combust. Somewhere in that mess of hair were his hands, and he didn’t much care that he’d lost them. Again.

“What was that for, Mr. Spock?” was the best he could come with, but considering he just locked lips with an S-Class SHIELD villain and Destroyer of Worlds with powers that would put any Vulcan to shame (his inner Trek-nerd was screaming), Tony figured he was allowed to have a lacking sass drive, especially since it felt like everything in his head had just short-circuited. He didn’t stop the funny sound his throat made when Loki raised a solitary eyebrow, unwittingly adding to the reference he didn’t understand.

“Just how long have you wished to do that?” Loki took a leaf from his book, a question for a question. Tony tried to muster up enough air to chuckle properly.

“You’re the one with the magic fingers. You tell me.”

“I cannot. I only sample the vaguest of emotions.” An easy smile. “I cannot read your mind, Stark.”

“Probably a good thing,” Tony allotted, grinning back. Smooth curls slid over his fingers and Loki’s eyes grew hooded, darkening the color. Tony licked his lips. “What did your magic tell you then?”

“You are broken, and alone,” Loki admitted. Tony snorted at him.

“Unbelievable,” he mumbled before claiming another kiss, mostly because he could, and there was absolutely no way in hell that was all that magic had picked up. His lips started to tingle, letting him know the Smurf side was at least agreeing with him, and kept the contact punishingly thorough but short, a challenge plain on his face when he parted them.

“Anything else, Radar?”

“A great many things.” Loki reached out a careless hand, tracing over his lips with a secret smirk and something almost warm crinkling in his eyelids. “You desire me.”

“You’re welcome.” Clever fingertips chased the words over his mouth. A flutter of eyelashes as Tony reburied his hands into the inky curls. And then, a slow-building smile, one that boded nothing good and everything explosive and fun. Being the recipient to such a look, Tony found a matching smile building on his own face. “What?”

“It is not often I extend a leaf of gratitude,” he murmured after a moment of contemplation. “But suddenly what I wish to receive from you is very clear to me.”

The light in the god’s eyes turned downright feral, the kind of predatory look that had most people running away screaming. Tony’s heart started to race, shrugging off the brief pang of unease with a rush of bravado. “What do you want then? Weapons? Armor? Magic blockers? Your own Krispy Kreme Donuts?”
“You,” Loki said simply, his voice rich with meaning and intent, and everything just sort of stopped.

“I – what?” was all he could manage as his brain caught fire once again, until he was sure there was smoke coming out his ears. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but it hadn’t been that. Loki only looked more amused.

“I want you,” he repeated, slowly, accentuating each word so Tony couldn’t possibly misunderstand. “What you flaunt, what you hide. Everything you are and all you possess. I want your deepest fears and most piercing regrets. Your nightmares, your genius. I want your every thought, every breath, to be turned to me, to be as lost and obsessed as I am by you, until such obsession removes its hold and releases our desires. I want what allows you to look upon a monster without a trace of revulsion. I want what has driven my world to madness.”

Their noses brushed for a split second and Tony could count each dark eyelash, feel the other’s breath against his mouth. There was no denying how serious he was from so close and Tony studied him openly, trying to catch any hint or trace of a lie. Loki merely smiled at him when a flicker of panic rose at finding none, showed on his face.

“You are not the only broken one here, Tony Stark,” he whispered, “and I mean to have you, all of you, as reparation.”

Oh. Well now.

“You… want me…?” Tony echoed lamely. It was strange how incredible and unbelievable those words sounded to his own ears, as though the notion had never even been a possibility (which, it hadn’t been). Frankly, it had been easier to swallow the news about powering up like Sailor Moon. The notion that he was an object of fixation and wanting twisted his insides into a tight coil of apprehension and anticipation; that not only were Tony’s feelings acknowledged, but accepted and matched. He wasn’t sure if the feeling was one he could welcome easily or not.

And yet, there it was.

A lump formed in his throat, choking him. “…why?”

“Why not?” Loki countered, as effortlessly as breathing. As though he hadn’t just brought reality to every dream Tony had had for the past two weeks. He seemed greatly thrilled about something and tilted his head, studying Tony closely. “Surely a man with your talents can see the possibilities. What we can create in our joint curiosity.”

He could see it and everything else he’d come to want these past weeks. Everything he had dismissed because it was far too impossible, too bizarre, to uncomplicated.

“Seriously. Me?” For some reason that part was tripping him up, skipping like a broken record. “Out of everything I could possibly give you… you want me.”

His astonishment took some of the confidence out of Loki’s expression and the god eased back just slightly, his lips pressed in a thin, disgruntled line.

“You doubt my intentions are sincere?” he bit out, brows furrowed. Tony shook his head.

“No, I believe you. It’s just… wow. You want me.”

It was a feeling he hadn’t felt since Pepper and the rush of security that brought felt terrifyingly like coming home. Which was stupid and ridiculous, because Loki wasn’t promising him a future, or a forever, or even another two weeks. The overwhelming surge of relief he felt was way too early,
months and months too early. But he could feel the way their broken edges seemed to line up, shift and fit together, and suddenly Tony wanted it all, no matter what it cost him in the end. Somehow, he knew it would be worth something.

When he and Pepper had fallen apart, what had hurt him more than the separation was the fact she wasn’t willing to fight tooth and nail to keep him. Story of his life: people came and people went. Sometimes they stayed around, but at the end of the day, Tony was still alone. Yet there was something there, in the steady gleam in Loki’s eye, the satisfied, almost fond smile on his face that told Tony all he needed to know: that he’d fight for this if he had to and wouldn’t stop weaseling into Tony’s world until everything went up in flames. And even then Tony wasn’t sure he’d be able to shake him off completely… or if he’d even want to try. It was unprecedented, bizarre, amazing.

The rush of exhilaration was explosive and Tony had to choke back a round of inappropriately loud, ecstatic laughter. “Oh my God. You want me,” he gasped out instead, misty-eyed. The star hummed happily against his heart in agreement, warming his insides. “So, I’m pretty sure this has never happened to me before.”

Mirth spun inside him, even as the reality of it all sank in. He was a broken hero, in deep, dangerous like with an equally broken villain; Tony knew it would probably end in fire, and maybe some ice. They were a messed up pair, two souls that no one would ever pair up, and yet here they were. And Tony didn’t want it any other way. Even the regret wouldn’t come, nor the weight on his conscience, and that was a good a sign as any to try.

Ready, fire, aim.

(“Are you sure about this?” Tony will breathe later, words heavy with want around swollen lips. “Because Hell, I don’t even know what this is.”

Loki’s eyes will be bright, words full of laughter as he leans down, without breaking rhythm. “I’m sure because I know what I want. And I want you. You are this, whatever this is. There is nothing else. And it is enough.”

And Tony will only laugh, because how they fit is frightening, and fulfilling, even in this early exploration. There’s a familiarity here, the understanding of two lonely souls meeting for the first time, or perhaps reuniting after a lifetimes apart.

“What am I to you, Little Prince?” And Tony will grin wide, considering the only question that will ever really matter anymore. “Just a Fox to tame and play with? Or just a Rose on a star to annoy and delight you, all at once?”

And Loki will not hesitate, for there will no longer be reason to. It is the only answer left to give.

“A Rose of course, for there are none as vain as you, nor as confusing…”)
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