Sleep Until the Sun Goes Down

by Schadenfreudessa

Summary

It’s been twenty years since anyone on Midgard has seen Loki the former super-villain. More importantly, it’s been twenty years since Tony Stark has seen Loki, his former lover. But now Thor’s invited all his Avenger buddies up to Asgard for the thunder god’s impending coronation, and how could any of them turn that down. Even if it means being faced with long buried feelings and a painful past for Tony, he’s not going to let that stop him. Besides, Loki made it very clear how he felt before, so why should there be anything to worry about now?

Notes

I have so many thanks to give, both to my wonderful artist L, and my beautiful beta remedyormemory!
Also, I'm gifting this work to my lovely Sunshine, who has been a constant stream of support and awesomeness throughout the writing process.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Arrival in a Golden City

Chapter Notes

Important things to note: This story is canon divergent from the end of the Avengers. Basically how it goes is Loki says his line "If it's all the same to you, I'll have that drink now", then poofs off into thin air. SHIELD is annoyed; Thor is sad; Tony is amused. Then Loki just pops back in every so often to shake things up with magic. The events of Iron Man 3 also make an appearance in this fic, but I reserve the right to do whatever I want with that plot because I'm the writer of this fic and I can do what I want.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The pull of the Bifrost isn’t easy on Tony’s body. Of course, life hasn’t been easy on Tony’s body, and maybe that’s why at only sixty-five he feels significantly older. Not that he would ever admit to it. He only gave up being Iron Man a few short years ago, and that was against his will, thanks to the near complete shredding of his ACL. He had tried to come back, but even following the mandatory rest period after the reconstructive surgeries, he hadn’t ever regained full mobility or use of his right leg. It was damning and it might have broken him - it hurt to be dragged unwillingly from his role by something that a younger man could recover from - but his team stood with him, and he still oversees them all on Avengers missions. Working out with them all in the gym has helped too, as it makes him feel like an invalid, and he has learned how to compensate for his leg when in a fist fight.

But the Bifrost is a rough ride, and it leaves Tony shaking and leaning more heavily on his cane than he normally would. Not that it really matters, as Tony’s cane was made by his own hands to his own specifications - meaning it could hold up to a beating by the Hulk and still look new, all gold and red as a reminder of who he had once been. After a moment, though, Tony has his breath and his control back, looking around at the splendor of the gods’ city.

The rest of the Avengers stand around him, all awed by what they see. Natasha and Clint aren’t visually or vocally appreciative - their secret agent skills at work - but Tony can pick up on the little things that give them away, like how Clint’s eyes can’t settle on anything for longer than a split-second, or how Natasha’s stance goes minutely slack despite being in an unknown environment. Bruce and Steve are far more open about their feelings; Steve’s hand is itching for a pencil as he mentally traces the lines in his head, and Bruce would probably have whipped out his little experimental magic-scanner if wouldn't have been rude towards the welcome party waiting for them.

Thor stands at the head of the group of their Asgardian welcome party, just as large and sunny as they had seen him last year - though that had been only in battle; it has been far longer since the god has had the time to just socialize. He is a little more bedazzleing, though, with circlet resting on his brow and bright metallic threads embroidering his clothes. The Thunderer isn’t in armor, either, instead wearing a deep red and loose-cut tunic over dark grey pants and black boots, all of which are covered in detailed stitching that heavily implies - if not actually screams - royalty. It isn’t casual, however - it actually feels more regal and formal than any time Thor has ever worn his full armor.

Noticing that the rest of the team seemed too awestruck to be of use, Tony takes it upon himself to step up. Using the careful gait he has perfected - a balance between keeping his limp inconspicuous and using the cane to keep the pain away - the engineer strides straight up to Thor, speaking all the way.

“Thor! Or should I call you King Thor? Or Your Grace? All-Daddy Mark II?” Tony rambles as Thor pulls him into a tight hug. It is a gesture he has long become used to - it is Thor’s favorite way to greet someone after a significant absence - and so Tony doesn’t falter in his chattering until he is on his feet again, and even then it takes Thor speaking over him to stop the words.
“I will always be just Thor to you, my friend”, Thor interrupts. Then his customary wide grin softens into a small smile that is much more private. Tony’s face echoes that same sentiment of long-time friends, but it only shows in his eyes. Even now, Tony doesn’t wear his feelings as openly as Thor does, but those who are important enough know what to look for. In a show of intimate companionship, Thor clasps a hand to Tony’s shoulder before pulling him into a much gentler hug that Tony returns willingly, one arm wrapping around the god’s waist as he leans forward on his cane. Chuckling, Thor teases, “How I have suffered in the quiet without your ceaseless babbling for company”.

“And I miss kicking your ass in video games, big fella”, Tony quips back. Thor releases him, leaving Tony to step away as cocksure and composed as ever, the small moment of vulnerability now over and the emotion hidden away. “But hey, it’s a good thing I won’t get smited - smite? smitted? smitten? - for calling you ‘just Thor’. It’s hard to keep a straight face while calling someone a king after you’ve caught them dancing to trashy pop music while wearing only bright pink and yellow boxer briefs”.

“You swore to never speak of that again!”

“And yet he brings it up at every reunion”, Bruce cuts in fondly, stepping forward to collect his own welcome hug from Thor. The rest of the team has finally gotten their shit together too, and a conversation is quickly struck up amongst the reassembled Avengers. Except Tony, who ignores the pleasantries in favor of looking at the others in the welcoming party.

He vaguely recognizes Xena and her Merry Men. And there’s an older woman who he would bet anything is Thor’s mom, standing at the arm of an old pirate who is probably Thor’s dad. Daddy-god looks gruff and unfriendly, like someone he won’t get along with - for more reasons than just his own father issues - but Thor’s mom is lovely, and there’s an air of both regality and sass about her that has Tony happily anticipating a chance to speak with her.

He is making a mental note to request an audience with her later when a flash of green and black draws his eyes to the farthest corner of the group. But maybe it’s his imagination because there’s nothing that could have caught his attention - Tony resolutely refuses to call it wishful thinking, because that is the last thing he could consciously wish for right now. Twenty years was too long and not nearly long enough.

Besides, he’s only here for the month, and then it’s right back home to save the world and play with his toys.

* * *

After the Avengers have all been properly welcomed and everyone has been introduced - not that Tony actually bothers to remember any names besides Queen Frigga’s - they all head off to the city proper. It’s a long walk, and the conversation is still stuck on boring pleasantries, so Tony let’s his eyes trace the lines of the city they’re approaching. It’s a rather impressive sight, and Tony’s mind is caught up in a whirl of equations, mentally mapping vectors and curves and tangents.

Of course, it’s not as impressive as the world Tony’s built up in his head. Nothing really could be, though, as what Tony dreams of is immense and unlimited in scope. Even JARVIS is impressed, if
one could read that into the AI’s silence when Tony had finally finished drawing out all his ideas to be saved. The only thing that is preventing that from becoming reality at the moment was a lack of materials - or even the nonexistence of materials - but that's why everything is saved to JARVIS's servers, so future generations of geniuses could make it happen. However, there are a few novel things that the Aesir have pulled off, and Tony is working them into some of his more simple building designs. But really, it is all more ornamental than functional, and that isn’t much use to Tony - there's even a building that looks like a giant pipe organ, and what's up with that?

“If I may interrupt your thoughts, Master Stark?”

Tony blinks away the numbers cluttering his vision and shakes the criticism away from his thoughts, turning to the voice that had spoken to him. It’s the Queen, easily falling into step beside him with a smile which he happily returns. “As if I would deny a beautiful woman my company, Your Highness”.

“Do you so blatantly flatter everyone you meet?” Frigga’s smile turns to a smirk, and it’s familiarity drives a lancing pain into that little part of Tony that was hollowed out a long time ago. Adopted though he might have been, it certainly seems that someone inherited Frigga’s humor. Worse yet is that it’s been so long since Tony has hurt like this, he doesn’t quite know how to handle it anymore. So he settles for forcing it down and pulls out all the stops on his charm, hoping that the Queen won’t notice, though it’s something that she certainly couldn't miss.

“Only those that deserve it”, Tony forces out, plastering on a bright grin and ignoring the realization glinting in Frigga's eyes. “And I can hardly think of anyone more worthy than you, m'lady”.

“Just Frigga, please”, the Queen demurs, giving Tony the peace of not acknowledging his pain, for which he is immensely grateful. He lets that turn his smile more sincere.

“Then I insist on being just Tony”.

At that, Frigga stops, and Tony is forced to stop at her side. With a sly look, she holds out a hand to him and speaks with a spark of laughter. “A pleasure, then, Tony”.

“Frigga”, the engineer returns with a chuckle, taking the Queen's hand and laying a kiss to her knuckles. "The pleasure is most certainly mine".

With the sting starting to ease from Tony's chest, Frigga too seems lighter and bubblier. Not that the Queen loses her elegance at all - that would be an impossibility, in Tony's opinion - but now he can see how this is the woman who raised Thor. There is a brightness - a sort of gentle kindness - about her that Tony long ago learned to associate with the Thunderer at his best, when something reminded him of what love and happiness could be. Now, like this, Tony sees the resemblance between Mother and Son, and it makes things easier. If Frigga can just keep reminding him of Thor, then Tony doesn't need to acknowledge how she is someone else's mother too.

As the two of them pass easily into silence, it doesn't escape Tony's notice that the rest of the Avengers and the welcome party are a considerable distance ahead. That's actually rather welcome, as the whole group was moving just slightly faster than he was comfortable walking. Now, Tony offers Frigga his arm instead, and when she accepts, they take off at a gentle stroll - Frigga lets Tony set the pace, and he keeps their movements slow, allowing his cane to take most of the stress.

“There will be a feast at the palace tonight”, Frigga states after they’ve been walking in peaceful silence for a short while, eyes still looking forward even as Tony glances to her. “It is being held in
your team’s honor, as I’m sure you could guess, but it will also be the start of an entire month of festivities”.

“Something every night?” Tony inquires with some dismay. An entire month of straight partying with immortals would have worn him down even at his best, and now it just sounds exhausting. Besides, he had wanted to do some exploring and studying too, not just hang out with loud and drunken gods, especially when he wouldn’t be drinking himself.

But Frigga nods, a knowing smile playing at the edges of her mouth. “Indeed. However, nothing is mandatory, and you may come or go as you please”. She glances sideways at Tony, chuckling at his obvious relief. “You will even find that the library is quite empty during the celebrating. It is a good time to visit if you enjoy the peace”.

“That sounds like a brilliant plan”, Tony agrees, already planning out how to spend his time - he should attend to the festivities every few days for Thor's sake, but if he spends most of the evenings in the library, no one will be surprised.

"Yes, but tonight you should allow us to honor you with a proper welcome", Frigga subtly demands. "And my son will be so pleased to have you there. He has been looking forward to this night for some time now".

"I would think that Thor would be sick of me by now", is Tony's laughing response, but Frigga shakes her head.

"I don't believe that any could be tired of your presence, but I wasn't speaking of Thor".

"Oh", is all that Tony can think to say. Really, it's a testament to years of practice in controlling himself that he doesn't falter in his steps or smile. But this is painful and unwelcome, though Tony can't find it in himself to hold that against Frigga. She must really believe that Loki wanted to see Tony again, but he doesn't agree; he can't even begin to believe that. Loki had made it clear before that Tony's company was not worth having, and Tony had accepted that and moved on, no matter how much it still caused him pain. "I'm not-"

"I know that Loki has hurt you in the past, Tony Stark, but even more than that, I know my son, and I know that he has spent these past nineteen years wishing to be at your side", Frigga asserts, expression suddenly determined and serious.

Tony can't stand to really look at Frigga anymore - not when she's so earnest - so he stares straight ahead. He knows that his eyes must be dark and that the lines of old wounds are showing now. Tony feels every bit of his age at that moment. "I wasn't the one keeping him away, my Queen".

"No", she sighs, "you were not".

Frigga says nothing more on the subject as they approach the palace of Asgard, and Tony doesn't ask, but still, it hangs in the air between them and dampens the ensuing conversation. Chatting about Asgard and it's traditions with Frigga doesn't seem nearly so important or entertaining now. Besides, Tony's thoughts are revolving around Loki and the celebration tonight. It's painfully obvious that he won't be missing today's feast. Tony tries to believe that he's only going for Thor, or to prove that he won't let his past with Loki still dictate him, but something still sounds off about it, even to his own ears.
Frigga leads Tony to the entrance of what will be his rooms for the duration of his stay, giving a cheerful goodbye and a quick hug that Tony was not expecting. As she walks away, Tony's left alone to heave the door to his rooms open with a shove, not happy with how damnnably heavy it is. And as with the rest of Asgard, Tony is not really that impressed.

The guest chamber that Tony is granted is nice enough. It follows in the theme that Tony is learning to associate with Asgard - bedecked in pompous metal ornament and far too clean to be maintained by anything less than magic. Which makes the lack of proper lighting all the more strange, as everything seems to be illuminated by candle, torch, or fire-pit. Sure, it’s atmospheric enough, but Tony’s never been a big fan of candle-light. His indifference for it in the past turned to distaste shortly after Loki’s leaving, and it hasn’t changed at all in the time since.

Having arrived in Asgard, this whole trip seems like a terrible idea. He didn’t think it would before, but apparently, even as unfamiliar as Asgard is to him, there are still enough little things - or big things - to trigger unpleasant memories. Had he known, then Tony could never have come, not even for Thor, which is sad as the god is a good friend, but it seems that Tony has been forever tainted, and nothing will allow him to forget it.

Shoving that melancholy aside because he’s already here, Tony sets out to prod and poke at everything in the room. His bags have been delivered as promised, set along a seat that looks like it’s covered in crushed velvet, but as Tony moves closer he realizes it’s some type of short fur. A touch shows it’s much smoother than velvet, but the color doesn’t look quite natural. Humming thoughtfully, Tony will have to remember to ask what it is later and see if maybe he can get a sample to take home with him.

Before Tony can move from his inspection on to grabbing his bags, however, there is a knock on the door. He contemplates not answering it for a long moment - he did only just get in - but he knows that after the little walkabout with Frigga, he is running a bit low on time before the banquet, and it might be something important. So with a sigh, he just leaves his things on the couch, opening the door to find a kid standing there.

It’s a boy, pretty young - well, really a teenager, but that’s still pretty young to Tony - and wearing the servants’ uniform. He’s just shorter than Tony is, and his head is lowered so that a mop of dark hair hides his face. But Tony’s attention is drawn to the bundle in his arms. It’s a bunch of fabric, deep burgundy in color with gold embroidery; the sheen on it says silk but it looks too heavy and thick. Anymore than that, Tony can’t really tell with how tightly the boy is holding it against his chest, but then it’s being held out for Tony to take.

“For you to wear tonight, Sir Stark. They are proper attire for a feast”.

Tony nods, carefully leaning his cane on the door-frame before grabbing the clothing with both hands and holding it up. And he gasps, because holy shit, this is gorgeous.

He was right about the red with gold thread-work, but they’re only accent colors to the deep black that makes up the majority of the outfit. There’s a black undershirt that he just knows will hug his arms and chest well enough to see the muscle definition there - it’s got a high collar that ends just under the jaw with a v-cut in front. On top of that goes a tunic; it is the deep red fabric he has seen, sleeveless and unadorned. With this is a leather piece - to hell and back if Tony knows what to call it
- but it’s just a slightly deeper red. When sitting over the tunic, it is eerily reminiscent of the Iron Man armor, with carefully done cut-outs, overlays, and straps to look like armor without limiting his movement at all. There are arm-pieces to it too, which strap over the tops of his arms, leaving the black of the undershirt showing through.

The pants are similar in that there are black, tight-fitting fabric leggings, and on top of them are the same deep red leather pieces. A matching jacket is even included; it is sleeveless and hits him mid-thigh, just the edgings of a high-collar to give definition to the neck. All the leather is inlaid with gold, too, which somehow manages to be both flashy and subtle at the same time.

Now, Tony’s never been a big fashion lover. Sure, he knows a nice suit when he sees one, but that’s more because he grew up in them than anything else. And anyone else in an outfit only ranks in how good they look, and not the clothing itself. But this, Tony can say is astonishingly beautiful, and he gets to put it on his body. He’s going to drop jaws in a way that he hasn’t in a long time, and Tony is really starting to get excited now. It even matches his cane!

Not able to help the gleeful smirk that lights up his face, Tony turns his attention to the kid, who’s still standing there quietly, not making eye contact. “Thanks a bunch, kid. This is amazing”.

“I will inform the prince that his gift has been well-received”, the boy says with a nod, then, seeming to hesitate for a moment, he speaks in a soft rush of words. “Will you be needing help with your attire?”

Blinking, Tony looks back to the outfit, taking note of the many straps, buckles, and hidden ties. “Oh, yeah. Good call, kid”, Tony praises, one hand wrapping around the handle of his cane before moving back into the room. Fuck, his leg is really hurting, most likely from all the walking he did earlier, and now he is going to have to attend the feast tonight, which will only exacerbate the problem. He is going to really hurt in the morning.

Laying the Asgardian garments on the bed, Tony hears the boy shut the door and step up to his side. This is going to be a bitch to put on, the genius can already tell, and so he sits on the edge of the bed, the cane lying behind him. It will make things easier for them both if he doesn’t stand unless absolutely necessary.

The kid - Tony really needs to get his name - starts fiddling with the formal outfit, unbuckling things and pulling the undershirt away. Taking this as his cue, Tony strips out of his suit jacket, tossing it somewhere across the room, then he peels off the t-shirt he was wearing underneath. The kid is shooting him glances from around his hair, but Tony knows better than to mind - he’s heard from Thor that battle wounds are a point of pride to Asgardians, and Tony’s got plenty of those - arc reactor included. Besides, even in his old age and with his injured knee, he’s still pretty well cut. Nothing to be ashamed of here.

Apparently the kid agrees, because Tony sees how the kid’s ears are nearly glowing red, and he can’t help but smile just a bit wider as he takes the black undershirt. It feels good to know that he can still be someone’s wet dream tonight, in an ego-stroking kind of way. But the kid is still just a kid, so Tony doesn’t tease or draw attention to the blush at all, just pulling the shirt on quietly.

It fits just as tightly as he thought it would, but for how light and cool the fabric is, the light of the arc reactor doesn’t shine through at all. As if reading the engineer’s thoughts - or maybe just the confusion on his face - the kid speaks up, “It’s spelled, Sir Stark, against light and heat both. The prince requested that especially”.

Humming in approval, Tony takes the tunic that is being handed to him, popping his head through with a grin. “Call me Tony, kid. I’m not some fairy tale knight”.

“Yes, sir”, the boy agrees, not realizing his mistake at first, but then faltering when he catches on. “I- I mean, Tony, sir”.

“Good enough”. Tony laughs at the kid’s obvious discomfort, brushing the tunic out flat before unbuttoning the front of his jeans. And oh, how the kid turns brighter than a cherry at that - helping visiting dignitaries get dressed must not be part of his normal duties. But it doesn’t stop Tony from slipping the jeans entirely off - though it is rather painful when he has to bend his knee; the joint has swollen up while he was sitting, and Tony winces as he rubs at it.

That doesn’t really help much, but Tony works through it, sliding on the black leggings and pulling them up. His hands do hesitate over the lacing, and the kid notices, making an inquisitive noise and reaching his hands forward in an offer to help. It’s appreciated, but unnecessary, and Tony manages to wave the kid off, swallowing around the lump that’s developed in his throat. He has taken these off and put them back on Loki so many times that not even two decades have been able to erase them from his muscle memory. His fingers tighten and pull on the strings just as deftly as they had before while the boy slides the boots onto his feet, tightening the straps there.

The kid holds up the leather leg pieces next, and it’s probably for the best that Tony was rubbing his knee, as he’s going to have to stand now. He has to grab the cane, though, and use it to push himself up to his feet, leaning heavily on it the whole time. In public, that display of weakness would bother him, but it’s too much to care about right now, especially not when it’s mostly unimportant. He isn’t too worried about the kid blabbing about this to his buddies.

Then the kid has his arms around Tony’s waist, very nearly knocking him off his feet in surprise. It's only to loop the top of the red leather chaps around, though - and chaps might not be entirely accurate, but Tony really doesn’t know what else to call them - but still, it's a bit of awkward positioning, what with the kid kneeling right in front of him and all. Tony clears his throat to try and dispel the awkwardness of it all, slapping on a grin as he looks down at the kid, whose hands have moved to his left thigh. "Normally I get a name before I let someone feel me up".

"Ah-" The kid's hands immediately fly away, held in front of him and twitching. He looks mortified, completely red from hair to neckline, and his pale green eyes blown wide open. Tony actually feels bad, now, watching the kid's mouth opening and shutting in aborted attempts to speak. "I'm - My apologies; I wasn't - I didn't-".

Deciding not to torment the kid, Tony waves it away, "No biggy, kid. Just my way of asking for your name. I don't really want to keep calling you kid".

“Dagan, sir”, the boy says in obvious relief. “My name is Dagan”. And with that, the boy - Dagan - returns to his work, first moving down Tony’s left leg, then his right. Tony lets him work undisturbed, though it’s weird to have someone helping him dress like this, even if he couldn't put this stuff on himself - it's almost as weird as it is to be in Asgardian clothes anyway. Then Dagan is finished, and Tony twists around a bit as the kid moves away, feeling how the leather pieces tighten and pull across his legs. They aren't too tight or constricting, allowing Tony to move with relative ease - that might be because they are like armor pieces in their design, or maybe it's from how well they have been fitted to his body.

As Tony straightens up and sits down again, Dagan is at his side with the leather chest piece, helping Tony to tug it over his head before working at the straps along Tony's side and back. With how
tightly the leather sits against his chest, Tony is really glad that Thor thought to have the undershirt all magicked up - he knows that otherwise, things would be getting really damn hot, really damn fast. It's some incredible foresight for the Thunderer, and almost out of character but for how much Thor has changed in preparing to be a king. Tony smiles to himself, mildly impressed with his fellow Avenger - though not really, as he had always known Thor would make a good king once someone kicked his ass into shape.

"Ah... Tony, sir?" Dagan's question snaps Tony out of his thoughts, and he realizes that the kid has already finished with all the straps and buckles on his outfit, now holding out the jacket instead. Tony isn't quite ready to stand up again - he knows that his knee is going to hate that - but he forces himself to anyway, carefully regulating his breathing so that he doesn't pant from the pain. Tony also chooses not to argue as Dagan takes it upon himself to ease the jacket onto Tony's shoulders, mindful of the arm that Tony is leaning his weight on. Then the whole getup is on - and damn that jacket is pretty damn heavy, but then it all is, really.

Dagan steps back, an arm extended towards the mirror and silently waiting for Tony's approval. Not wishing to waste any more time on primping for this feast, Tony walks forward, pausing in front of the mirror with a breath before letting himself admire the view. And holy fuck, it's quite a view.

He looks tall: that's Tony's first impression of himself. It's true, too - somehow, the jacket and boots work in tandem to give the genius the illusion of added height. All the leather works brilliantly as well; he doesn't look too much like a costumed nerd, and there's a sort of regality to how the red and gold lay against the black undershirt and pants. The two tones of red don't clash either, and despite the work being of Asgard, Tony's cane seems to be the last piece tying the whole outfit together.

It's more tasteful than the capes and gilded helmets that Tony knew to be Asgardian formal wear, but it's still flashy and demanding of attention, just as Tony is. In fact, Tony himself is so entranced by his own reflection that he nearly misses Dagan's polite cough. Turning slightly, he gives the kid most of his attention - though he's still admiring how the jacket compliments the swell of his fine ass - and Dagan bows low, returning to much more formal manners than when he had been strapping Tony into this glorious leather attire. "Tony, sir... If you're ready, the feast is nearing it's start. If you wish to arrive with your compatriots, you should depart now".

"Sounds good", Tony acquiesces, quickly running a hand through the silver of his hair and checking it in the mirror. After the quick little grooming, Tony finally - and less than willingly - turns his back to the reflection, smiling at Dagan, who's moved to the door and is holding it open. With a nodded thanks, steps through it and out into the hallway, taking a few steps before coming to an abrupt halt. Feeling Dagan's eyes on his back, Tony turns to look sheepishly at Dagan. "I don't remember how to get there".

There is a huff - almost, but not quite, a laugh - and Dagan shuts the door. "I can show you, sir".

Chapter End Notes

A word from the artist:
"Ahh, the beautiful love song of two emotionally constipated narcissists. So it goes."
Dagan finally leaves Tony just outside a small set of double doors, gesturing that the genius should head through them. Tony's not sure if he should just thank him - or maybe tip him or something - but the kid has vanished around a corner or through a hidden door before Tony's done more than think about it. Shrugging away the disappearing act, Tony pushes open the door and steps through, grin wide on his face. He can't wait to see the outfits that Thor had put together for the rest of the team.

No one else is in fancy get up. That fact managed to click quite quickly when Tony sees his team. Not that they don't look good, of course; Natasha is practically incapable of looking anything less than drop-dead sexy, and Steve isn't too bad either. But all the Earth guys of the group are in standard - if well cut - suits, and Tasha is in a slinky, black, open back dress that was almost scary in how well she pulled it off. Thor is the only exception, wearing something similar to his clothes from earlier, though richer in make and with an additional cloak thrown over top.

That isn't Asgardian gear like Tony is wearing though. There is no leather armor with fancy embroidery, or knee-high boots paired with thigh-length jackets. No one is even wearing bright colors like the red and gold of Tony's outfit, and he stands out in a very bright and shining way.

Next to catch Tony's attention is the blank stares that everyone is giving him, even Thor. Well, that rather seals the deal, and Tony starts to mentally smacking himself for assuming that 'The Prince' Dagan had referred to was Thor. Of course Thor wouldn't think to have customized outfits made for his teammates; the guy probably had someone pick out his own outfits for him - Tony is aware that's a mean thought to have because Thor really isn't stupid, but goddammit he's frustrated. Here he is, claiming to be a fucking genius, and even after that little chat with Frigga about Loki, he still fell for some stupid ass trick like this. And he hadn't even been suspicious at all!

Tony shuts that all down, though, because it's too late to back out or actually do anything about this, and being angry would make dealing with his team's questions that much harder. And questions would be inevitable with his teammates all thinking he needed to be protected from Loki's machinations, no matter how very true that might be.

"Nice costume, Captain Hook". Clint is the first to finally speak up, breaking the silence with a quip that eases some of the tension from Tony's shoulders. "Off to plunder some Asgardian booty?"

"Sounds like a plan, Feathers", Tony returns, but any further teasing is cut off by Steve.

"Tony, where did you get that?" the Captain asks with no little confusion.

Sighing, Tony steps fully into the room, letting the door fall shut behind him as he approaches the circle of his team. "It was delivered to me, Cap. A present from The Prince". Tony lets the anger and distaste he feels for this trick lace his tone. "Though from seeing Thunder-Brain's face, I'm thinking that I got the wrong prince".

"As fine as the garments are", Thor says, eyes still staring hard at Tony's outfit, "I can claim no responsibility for this gift".
"So Loki then", Natasha observes, and Tony felt the bottom fall out of his stomach when Thor nods. That's ridiculous too, as it's what Tony had already figured out, but the confirmation makes it that much more unpleasant. "Just like we thought".

Actually, it would be far more accurate to say just like Natasha thought, as it was her call that if Loki was on Asgard when Tony was, he would become distantly possessive, fending off anyone else who would approach Tony but without actually stepping up himself. The others all agreed to a certain extent, though Bruce and Steve thought the trickster's attempts to get Tony back would be more along the lines of traditional wooing. Clint had bet on blatant seduction; Tony had chosen not to think about those possibilities at all, betting - hoping - that Loki would be out sightseeing across the universe for this one month.

Bruce finally speaks up, pulling the team from their respective thoughts. "What do we do about this?"

"Nothing", Tony answers, cutting off the speech that he could see Steve gearing up for. "It's too late now to head back and change, and I'm not letting Loki's tricks dictate my night".

"So we just act like nothing's happened?" Steve growls back, not happy about the interruption or that plan.

"Tony's a big boy", Clint defends. "He can take care of himself".

Steve doesn't look like he wants to agree, but Tony's not going to back down either, so the blond has to let it slide. "Fine", he acquiesces. "Just - no drinking tonight. Okay, Tony?"

"I'm not going to fall back into bad habits, Captain", Tony spits, but the genuine concern on Steve's face makes him sigh, shame-faced.

Patting the genius on the shoulder, Steve just nods. "I don't think you will, but if it was going to happen, now would probably be the worst possible time".

"Point made", is Tony's reply, and that's enough for Steve to step back with a smile.

"Let's head in, then", the Captain gestures to the large door across the room, taking point and leading everyone else into what must be the banquet hall.

Everyone but for Tony and Thor, that is. Tony is rather trapped, one of Thor's large hands holding him in place. The Thunder god doesn't say a word until the team is gone without them, though, just watching the rest of the group walk away. But then he is right in front of Tony, staring quite seriously at the man.

"You should not attend the feast tonight, Tony", Thor warns, voice low and growling. "You should go back to your rooms, perhaps with Bruce as company, and you should stay there for the night".

"What the hell, Thor!" Tony starts, but he doesn't get any farther before Thor is speaking over him.

"That is not just a suit my brother ordered for you, friend. That stitch work is magical in nature, a design of Loki's creation, and any who see you in this will know you to be claimed by him".

"Slow down and explain", Tony tries to calm Thor down, but so far he feels like he's still missing something important.
Thor growls, but he takes a breath and seems to settle a bit. "Loki did not just buy this outfit. He made it himself, most likely from scratch, including dying, sewing, and charming the pieces. Added to that, he used a set of runes and patterns that he designed - magic doused embroidery that has only ever been seen on his own clothes. For anyone in Asgard, this is as good as a proposal for courtship, and you wearing it will be seen as you accepting that proposal".

"Well shit".

Humming, the thunder god agrees, standing back slightly now that he's managed to convey the seriousness of the situation. "Of course, were you to say it a trick, most would believe that, but the main effect would remain. No one will approach with intentions beyond mere friendship for fear of upsetting Loki".

"That's...", Tony starts with a frown, but the expression doesn't stick. Almost immediately, a grin steals over his face. "That's actually a really good thing". At Thor's puzzled expression, Tony elaborates. "I'm not looking for love or hook-ups tonight, Thor; you know that. This will keep the sex-hounds of Asgard off my back, I'm betting, meaning I only have to deal with Loki".

Thor's incredulity shows in the cocked eyebrow he's pulling, and it's like he's silently asking 'And what's so good about that?'

Laughing, Tony keeps up his explanation. "C'mon Thor, you know Loki. If I walk in knowingly wearing what is practically his brand on me, it will make him confident. He'll think that I'm actually interested in starting something up again, but I'm not. I'll have the upper-hand for once". For probably the first time, he silently amends, patting an unimpressed Thor on the arm and heading straight for the feast with his sexiest smirk and a confident stride.

Sighing, Thor shakes his head at Tony's cocky grin, but he knows better than to argue with that. It is true, after all, that Loki will be more arrogant after seeing Tony's choice in clothing. But as Tony walks away towards the banquet hall doors, the blond god sincerely doubts that Tony's not interested. He knows how Tony felt back the first time around, and he knows that feelings so strong don't just go away, not even after twenty years.

But he holds his tongue, following after his friend. It's not his place to interfere any more than he already has.

* * *

The Grand Hall is in possession of what is probably one of the most impressive sights that Tony has seen yet. The vaulted ceiling stretches farther upwards than the mind - even one as impressive as Tony's - can quite comprehend, which bothers him to no end. Being an engineer through and through, things that seem to break the laws of physics really are not cool. But instead of vocally complaining, Tony makes the decision to just ignore it, hoping that maybe it will just stop being impossible if he doesn't look at it for long enough. Instead, he comes to stand by his team, joining them on a small dais at the entrance to the room.

Aside from the ceiling of the room, there isn't much else to it that can't be seen in the rest of Asgard - lots of gold and stuff. From where the Avengers are standing, there is an aisle straight up the center
of the room to the head table where the royal family sits, with other tables and benches on either side. It's a safe bet, though, that all the special guests must sit with the royalty as there are more empty seats up there than anywhere else in the hall. The entire room is packed, after all, with Aesir in their bright armor and crazy costumes. It's like the most intense Renaissance Fair ever held, but Tony isn't left to ponder that for long as Thor finally follows him in, striding right past the Avengers to stand in front of them.

"People of Asgard", the Thunderer starts in a booming voice, though he doesn't need to speak so loudly as the whole room has fallen respectfully quiet. "It is my honor to present a team of fine warriors to you tonight. A group of brave Midgardians who I have fought with for many years now, and who have taught me much and have helped me to grow as a man, and as a Prince of Asgard. These people are some of my closest friends, and they are more than worthy to join me tonight in celebration. I stand before you with Midgard's finest - the Avengers!"

Suddenly, everyone is standing and cheering very loudly, the whole room just a chaotic mass of noise before the assembled heroes. Tony's rather impressed with that little speech - Thor's eloquence has certainly improved since they first met - but he wishes that there had been some kind of debriefing about all this, as he's clueless about what happens next. Are any of the Avenger's supposed to say something now, or does everyone just plop down and eat the food that's already been laid out on the table? But Thor saves the moment by flinging one arm around Tony's shoulder and the other around Bruce's, practically dragging the two men forward.

They do move past all the lower tables, just as Tony expected, stopping before the table at the head of the room. Frigga is already seated there, and so are Odin and Thor's little group of Asgardian buddies, but the rest of the table is empty, with enough seats for Thor, the Avengers, and one more person. Then Thor gives them the all clear to sit wherever they please, so Tony moves immediately to grab the seat next to Frigga. He shoots her a warm smile as he sits, and it's returned.

Bruce sits down on Tony's other side, and the rest of the team must have realized who that extra chair is for because they all gather around him, leaving the empty seat at the very other end of the table and as far from Tony as possible. He appreciates the sentiment, but doesn't comment on it, instead introducing everyone to Frigga personally, making up for the rather rushed introductions from earlier. When he finishes speaking, a servant pops up at his side, asking if Tony wishes to put aside his cane, but he turns down the offer, choosing to keep it resting against the table next to him. The servant just acquiesces and moves away, but then someone else is behind him. Tony catches a glimpse of green from the corner of his eye, then there is a soft brush of fingertips against the back of his neck and a voice, just a soft purr speaking quietly. "How attached you are - still so sentimental".

It takes a great effort of concentrated will not to react with violence, to just let the words hang in the air and pretend that nothing has happened. Tony doesn't turn around or look; he keeps his eyes trained forward until finally he hears Loki moving away. Some of the tension bleeds away then, but still Tony keeps his focus on Natasha, who is sitting across from him and has the decency to keep her eyes on Tony too, as if they are conversing about something important and she hadn't even noticed Loki's interruption. It's Steve who keeps his focus on Loki, and the soldier's sigh is how Tony knows that the god has taken a seat at the sole empty space. Then everyone is eating, and Bruce ropes Tony into a conversation between himself and Frigga, all three talking about the architecture and city planning that's gone into Asgard.

The food laid out before them is all pretty good, but there's lots of roasted meats and not much else. Never having been one for super-beefy meals - his addiction to bacon and burgers is completely irrelevant - Tony pretty much only picks at what's before him. Natasha, Clint, and Bruce are the same, and while Steve eats enough to keep up with their Asgardian table buddies, he certainly does
so with less vigour. Soon enough, the meaty offerings are devoured, though, and the next course
that's brought out is much fruitier.

Servants set before them plates piled high with all sorts of sweet-looking fruits. They are all brightly
colored - almost unnaturally so, in some instances - and while a few are recognizable, most aren't.
Hesitantly, Tony reaches out to grab one that looks like it might be related to a kiwi, and he slices it
open. The inside isn't the pale green color he had been hoping for, but the jewel-tone purple is
enticing in it's own, alien way, so he takes a bite anyway. Not surprisingly, it doesn't taste like a kiwi;
it's tangier and sweeter, more like an orange-flavored candy than a fruit. It's good enough, and since
there isn't much else that Tony has eaten, he digs in.

It's a tragic error, as the moment Tony takes a bite that is larger than his previous nibbles, the fruits
spurts juice rather violently. It dribbles out over Tony's mouth, flowing wildly down his chin and
over his hands. Unfortunately, though, the Aesir don't seem to believe in napkins of any kind, and
Tony blinks around confused, looking for something that he can clean himself up with while Clint
and Thor freely laugh at him. Natasha, Bruce, and Steve at least have the decency to be more
subdued, and after hearing Frigga's tittering laughter, Tony finds he doesn't have any desire to
begrudge her the joke either.

It's another's laughter that really draws Tony's attention - a chuckle that's more mocking and
malicious than any from the Avengers. He doesn't need to look up, though, to identify who else has
seen his little fruit debacle, but it does inspire him to be a bit mischievous. Instead of wiping his
hands clean on the table cloth or his clothes - as he had originally thought to do - Tony brings his
fingers up to his mouth, eyes cast downwards as if to appear demure. Slowly, the man licks at the
juices there before sucking each finger into his mouth and cleaning them more thoroughly than
necessary. It's a purposely seductive move that Tony has employed before to great effect, and he's
satisfied to hear Loki's laugh trail off into silence.

Then there's a handkerchief being shoved under Tony's nose, and he looks up to see a resigned
Captain America holding it out with a sigh. "Just clean yourself up, Tony".

The genius takes it with a wink and a smile, mood having improved greatly since Loki's earlier
comment. He cleans himself up, still careful to avoid looking at the far end of the table, but Steve
waves him off when he tries to return the handkerchief. Instead, Tony tucks it into one of the leather
belts of his outfit, placed at his side so the jacket will hide it. Immediately after, Natasha catches his
eye, winking at him from across the table, and Tony smirks back. It's just the super-spy's little way of
letting him know that his prank had the desired effect. It's tempting, and Tony briefly entertains the
thought of observing the results of his hard work firsthand, but that would leave him vulnerable for a
sort of counter-prank, so he decides to let it be. After all, he's still got the satisfaction of a job well
done.

* * *

Eventually everyone finishes eating after several more courses are served, alternating between plates
of meats and plates of fruits or vegetables. Tony had found himself stuffed full after three of the
courses, and he had instead spent most of the time getting gossip from Frigga and Xena - er, Sif,
Tony mentally corrects. It's not actually gossip, of course, as Tony and Sif both could care less about
people's comings and goings in Asgard; they actually discuss Asgardian traditions and customs, with
Frigga providing most of the information and Sif adding a few comments on niceties here or there.
Tony actually finds that he likes Sif, for all that his previous encounters with her had been sort of hostile. But he's learning that the goddess is sort of like Natasha, in that they both seem abrasive until you earn their respect. After that, they are still abrasive and aggressive, but it's sort of a fond aggression. When he realizes this he immediately draws Natasha into the discussion and has the pleasure of watching Sif and Natasha go at each other for a while. It's really more amusing than it by any right should be, but it passes the time as everyone else is eating, and it serves to keep Tony from getting bored, especially since he's only having water to drink.

And after the food comes the dancing. Everyone on the lower level of the feast helps to push away the tables there, clearing a large open space for people to move in. Music filters in from somewhere - magic is how Frigga explains it - and some sort of complicated and half-drunken line dance breaks out amongst the gathered people. It's loud and raucous, with rowdy dancers shoving and pulling at each other, but that's actually endearing it to Tony. It's by far the most Viking thing that he's seen all day, except for maybe the beards that most everyone is sporting.

Even Thor and his buddies at the head table step out to join in the dance. Tony would like to follow after them and maybe learn a few moves, but the fast movements and twirling is more than his leg or cane can handle, especially after a long day of walking around and travelling by jarringly bright, magical bridges. So he attaches himself to Bruce's side instead, sticking to the edges of the room where people are just mingling. Out of habit, Tony picks up a mug of Asgardian mead, even though he doesn't intend to drink. It's at least something to do with his free hand as the other curls around the handle of his cane, and it keeps people from trying to embrace or grab at him.

Bruce and Tony start to make a circuit of the room, sharing observations quietly about the culture and people. But then some bright-eyed Asgardian woman gets an arm around Bruce, and Tony looses his friend to the mob of dancers. While it leaves Tony alone, though, he isn't bothered because the panicked look on his science buddy's face as he's twirled around is well worth it. Tony doesn't even bother to smother the laugh that bubbles up from his gut, leaving him gasping for air amongst the giggles.

"Enjoying yourself, Anthony?"

Tony stops dead in his laughing, straightening up to his full height as a body settles into the spot Bruce had previously occupied. The genius has tensed up, and while he knows it and is aware of it, there isn't much he can do to stop that natural reaction to a threat, no matter how telling it might be to others. Tony chooses to brace himself instead, turning to face Loki for the first time since the god's decision to... leave.

Loki looks different after so much time. which sounds obvious, but it still knocks Tony slightly off his game. Not that the god has aged or gotten older - hello, god - actually, the trickster looks even younger. The edge of weariness and exhaustion is gone from his features, taking with it the gauntness from his face and the dark bags from under his eyes. His whole body is just more relaxed as well, with a general easiness in his stance that makes him seem just a slight bit more approachable. Loki's cheeks are a bit fuller and with a faint flush to color them; he appears well-fed and healthy, and it's a good look for him.

His appearance is different in more superficial ways too. The god has let his hair grow much longer, so that even pulled back in a high pony tail like it is, the black strands still brush along his back at just beneath his shoulder blades. Blinking, Tony can even make out a narrow braid pulled from one temple up into the pony tail and dangling down from there. The new softness of Loki's face keeps the look - or the dark, sleek hair against pale skin - from being too severe on him, though, and he
manages to be regal without appearing harsh or cold.

Staring up at the god now, Tony isn't sure what he expected Loki to look like after all this time - isn't sure if the differences are a good or bad thing. They show that time has passed for Loki too, but that hurts in its own way. And while maybe seeing Loki exactly as he was two decades ago would be worse, there's enough in the god that hasn't changed - enough so that a part of Tony is still aching for what he used to have and what he's missed.

The soft brush of black eyelashes against Loki's pale skin when his eyes fall shut - that's the same, Tony can already see. Or how Loki's lips grow faintly red when he releases the tension in his jaw to smile; or the way you can read that very same smile in his eyes, saying that there is at least something sincere in it, though Tony is betting on mocking amusement over general happiness. None of that's any different than from what Tony knows - or knew - and it's twisting in his gut because he may be in way over his head, but he won't go back. He won't let Loki ensnare him, not after all this time, and not ever again.

"I was", Tony replies after what has to have been way too long. Loki, however, seems to have chosen to ignore the pause, and the genius is a little grateful for that small mercy. He bites out acerbically, "But I'm not really in the mood anymore".

Smile dimmed just slightly, Loki leans back a bit, but the warning in Tony's sharp words doesn't deter him for very long. The god steps definitively closer, a hand brushing against Tony's fist clenched around the handle of his cane. "Perhaps then, you are in the mood for another form of entertainment".

"No thank you, Prince", is the biting response, but Loki doesn't even pout. The god just very determinedly wraps his sinfully long fingers around Tony's right wrist, turning to stand in front of him and partially obscuring the man from anyone else's view. They are close enough now that Tony knows one of Loki's legs is just short of pressing between his own, but the flare of lust is mild compared to the anger that burns through him. It's only the tankard of mead in his hand that keeps him from trying to punch the god. "Get off me".

"I have missed the feel of you against me, and I know you have missed me just the same".

"I said to get off me, Loki". But Loki doesn't back away. He brings up a hand instead, resting it against Tony's cheek, thumb brushing from the corner of the man's lips and up over his cheekbones. Tony flinches sharply away, movement harsh enough to startle the god back a step. It's not as far as Tony would like, but it does give him some room to breathe. He takes a large, shuddering breath before glaring up at Loki.

Loki is staring down at him with a frown. "You have enjoyed my touch many times before, Anthony Stark. What has changed?"

"I have, you bastard", Tony growls lowly. "I didn't come to Asgard looking for a fuck with you, so you can piss off".

"If you seek to console yourself between the legs of another", Loki returns, anger sharpening his tongue even as something else flashes in his eyes, "then you will find no solace here. All of Asgard knows now that you are mine". With a painful amount of force, Loki jabs at the embroidery on Tony's fancy outfit, eyes locked onto the shorter man's. "You bear my mark".

That's perfectly alright with Tony - the not fucking part, not the other bit - so he smirks cheekily at
the angry god. "I'm not looking for any ass tonight, Loki. I'm just not interested".

Now that takes the god by surprise, and Loki straightens up even as he blinks in confusion. The god has also pulled his hand away from Tony's wrist, and with the space between them growing, Tony doesn't waste the opportunity to walk away. Let Loki mull over that for a while; it's not as if Tony cares, and it certainly wasn't a lie.

But rejoining the party holds no appeal for the man - not when he can't dance or be rowdy anyway. And with Bruce finally settled into the swing of things, much like the rest of the Avengers, Tony doesn't want to ruin that by pulling any of them away to be his shield against Loki. That doesn't leave much to do besides either getting completely drunk or just leaving, and he had made a promise to Steve about the drinking, so he just heads up to leave. Unfortunately, as he turns away, he can't help but to look up just once more at Loki. Even with half the length of the hall between them, Tony can see that the confusion has gone from Loki's face. Instead, there is something achingly similar to hurt or sadness there, and it tries to draw him in - pull him back to Loki to comfort or console or just be there.

It doesn't bare thinking about, though, so Tony forces himself to walk out of the hall, repeating a mantra to himself about how it was just a trick of Loki's. He doesn't really believe that though; it had seemed much too heartbreaking for just a trap of sorts. Hands shaking, Tony absently gulps at his drink, but nearly coughs it out as he realizes what he's doing. His promise to not drink is there at the forefront of his mind, relaying all the consequences, but with the trembling desire to run to Loki's side still there, Tony ignores it. He takes another large swig, finishing off the entire tankard before setting it aside on a bench.

Tony leaves the tankard behind, walking with painful steps onward, though he doesn't know where he is or where he's going, just that it's away.

* * *

Tony is glad to have escaped the feast when he did. His head is spinning, both from the earlier implications of his costume and from the overabundance of alcohol. Even if it was only one Asgardian-sized mug, he hasn’t drunk more than a single beer or a finger of scotch in quite a while. He shouldn't have had a drink at all, really, just like he had promised Steve he wouldn't, but he had needed the distant familiarity of the cold brew to keep him from reaching out and doing something to Loki. It just happened to have been some really heady stuff; even watered down, and once it had hit his system, it nearly knocked him off his feet. With all the additional stress Loki had added tonight, though, it would be so easy to keep going, but he won’t. Tony still has that much control, though he’s starting to see now that he needs to be on guard here, or he will mess up badly. And he can't afford to lose it here, or to give Loki any sort of extra advantage.

But still, while lying on a stone bench out in the garden he had sort of stumbled into, Tony can’t help but think that maybe he's being more confrontational than he needs to be. Yeah, sure, Loki had been a bit of an ass and a total flirt, but he wasn't being excessively cruel or malicious. He was just being Loki - a trickster and mischief god through and through. Besides, Tony's changed so much, and Loki's just starting to learn that now, so maybe he'll back off on his own, without Tony needing to be defensive. Whether or not he wants Loki to back off, though, is something else entirely.

One of Tony's newer skills has been learning the benefits of being introspective on occasion. So while his forebrain recognizes that Loki is dangerous, that ache just behind Tony's arc reactor tells
him that he does in fact miss Loki dearly, on some level. And it has been so long now that maybe it's
time to forgive Loki, or maybe just chat about what happened between them. If he does pursue
something, he's wiser now, and it's been enough time that he won’t get trapped so easily into
anything that will hurt him, but the question remains if the possible reward was worth the risk. After
all, isn’t he happy now? Does he need to pursue something that could be long dead - if it even
existed in the first place? No, he doesn’t, but he wants to anyway; that's what makes Loki so
dangerous.

Getting nowhere in the circling thoughts of want versus need versus risking his sanity, Tony closes
his eyes against the stars and the rapidly decaying spiral of his mind. The cool night air brushes
against his face like a half-forgotten caress from pale fingers, and Tony's left almost helpless against
the words from an old song that bubbles up in his throat until he risks bursting from it all, despite the
pain that singing can still bring. But the alcohol in his system makes everything seem a little less
painful, so he doesn't fight too hard against the idea of singing to an empty garden.

“Son can you play me a memory
I'm not really sure how it goes
But it's sad and it's sweet
And I knew it complete
When I wore a younger man's clothes”.

“They’re sharing a drink they call loneliness, but it’s better than drinking alone”, is the unexpected
reply, a deep voice singing through the echo of Tony’s words. Maybe the garden wasn't so empty as
he thought, but there are very few people who would know that song on this world. So he's not
surprised that it’s Thor’s low growl of a voice which greets him. Somehow, the large man is quiet
enough that Tony can't hear his footsteps on the stone path, and his voice blends with the stillness of
the garden, not disturbing the trance-like peace of it at all. It should be odd, but Tony’s not startled or
disturbed by it, so he can’t be bothered to mind.

Instead, Tony just opens his eyes, keeping them trained on the stars as Thor moves to stand at his
feet. The sky of Asgard is possibly the most beautiful thing of all the realm's wonders, and then it’s
only in that it reveals so much that can’t be seen from Earth. It’s mesmerizing to just lie back and
follow the swirl of distant galaxies, tracing their gentle movement around the zenith over the course
of time. Not even the addition of Thor’s presence can draw Tony away from the sight, and so they
remain in silence until the raucous laughter of the feast bubbles around them, pushing at the edge of
their calm.

Humming in tuneless contemplation, Tony finally looks to his friend. “You skipped a few lines in
between, Billy Joel”.

“I know”, Thor replies, meeting Tony’s gaze with a careless shrug. “It seemed a much more fitting
sentiment, however”.

“I'm surprised you even know the song. Always thought you liked your rock a bit harder”, Tony
huffs, sitting up with a weak, half smile.

“I often hear it whenever I pay visit to Loki’s rooms. His magic projects the song straight from his
memories”.

Tony flinches against the implications of that simple statement - against where the trickster would
have heard the classic rock masterpiece, or what it means to him and maybe, possibly to Loki, too.
But Thor isn’t done, “It has started fading, however. The words and the tune are there, but the voice
is indistinct and sings with no emotion. It has been too long since he has heard it performed, it would seem”.

“Yeah, twenty years will do that”. Tony’s words aren’t kind, but Thor doesn’t react, letting the bitterness slide away into the night. It’s something that Tony should be thankful of - that Thor knows these comments aren’t targeted at him - but right now Tony just wants to be angry at someone. He wants to growl and curse and scream because even two decades and the beautiful sky above him can't make the pain quite stop. It's still lingering around, and Tony wants it to just end. But Thor's not to blame, so Tony doesn’t stop him from moving closer.

“Even the minds of gods fail after too long”, Thor admits, taking the empty seat at Tony’s side. The god-king is looking at his hands, playing with the solitary ring that he wears, and Tony lets the conversation fall to the side, returning the favor from before and not interrupting Thor’s thoughts.

It’s nearly a surprise, then, when Thor speaks up again. “How long has it been, Tony? How long has it been since you and Loki...” The question trails off into the silence of the garden.

“Since what, Thor?” Tony starts angrily, but the old rage is leaking away from him. The hurt might still be there, but it takes too much time and effort to maintain it anymore, especially when Thor’s very presence manages to be carefully soothing. Sighing, Tony chooses to speak softly instead.

“Since Loki left, or since I stopped waiting for him to come back?”

With a knowing and sympathetic look, Thor brushes his hands through his hair. “Does it even matter?”

“No, it really doesn’t”, Tony acknowledges, frowning. They were both terrible days as far as Tony was concerned; two of the worst, most certainly. “Nineteen years, eleven months, and seven days since he left. Eleven years, five months, and six days since I gave up on him coming home”.

Thor nods, one of his hands resting on Tony’s shoulder in an attempt to comfort. “Just know that you are free to leave whenever you wish, my friend. I will not ask you to stay where you do not want to be, especially if my brother continues to haunt you like this”.

A mirthless chuckle escapes Tony, but he pats Thor’s hand in thanks anyway. He has no intentions of leaving, because he wants to show both Loki and himself that he’s fine, and that he can handle this. Besides, he doesn’t want to ditch out of Thor’s coronation or partying, and there is the fear that Loki will just follow him if he flees anyways. For all Tony's general confusion about this situation, he does know that he doesn’t want Loki to be in his home right now or ever again. “I can’t just leave you, Thor. That wouldn’t be cool of me”. Thor is definitely gearing up to protest, though, so Tony cuts him off. “But if it really comes down to that, just know that I appreciate the offer”.

That manages to deflate the god, who only nods silently. It's one thing that Tony is starting to notice about Thor - he's gotten quieter in his personality, though it hasn't dampened him at all. Some sneaking thought whispers that it's probably from Loki, and that really brings forward something that Tony had never really thought about. "What's Loki doing in Asgard anyway?" It feels almost like he's betraying himself just to ask, but now that he's thought about it, Tony needs to know.

"After his punishment ended, and after returning from his extensive travels", Thor starts - which okay, Tony knew about those things, but that was also when he stopped asking after the god. "After all that, he came back here and sought to prove himself before all the people, my father included. He was successful, as Loki almost always is, and he has won himself a position in the heart of Asgard's citizens”. There's something more than that, Tony can tell from the sideways glance that Thor is
giving him, but he doesn't want to ask any more revealing questions. Thor keeps talking, though, "He has retaken his position as Prince, as you have surely figured out, and when I am crowned, he will take on the role of head advisor to the crown".

So that was where Thor was getting his new diplomat skills from. "Is that a good thing, then?" Tony asks.

"It is for me", is Thor's self-depreciating snort. "I don't think I will ever live up to my brother's abilities in diplomacy or politics".

"Nah", Tony agrees with a slight smile. "But you can still kick just about anyone's ass at a drinking game I bet, and that is way more awesome".

The light-hearted comment seems to startle a laugh out of Thor, and it would be impossible for Tony not to smile about that. One of the thunder god's hands slaps Tony playfully on the shoulder. "I shall retain that title until the end of all things, Tony Stark! No man or woman could ever defeat me".

Now Tony was really laughing. "But what about that one time with Natasha and-"

"Lady Natasha is an entity unto herself", Thor interrupts with a defiant and godly pout. "None might ever compare themselves to her and expect to win".

"I can't argue with that logic".

"Nor should you if you wish to avoid the Black Widow's Bite". Both men laugh at the memory they share of the Avenger's media coverage from not long after their first team up. Someone had decided that each hero needed an action figure, and while Natasha's had originally started as the stereotypical female character - with lots of breasts and hips and no actual weapon - it was soon changed to something far more badass. No one really knew how Natasha had found out about hers before it's official release, or who she had to scare the piss out of to get it changed. But when the action figure's tagline 'Fear the Black Widow's Bite', it was soon everyone's favorite inside joke to use, especially when Clint or Thor would try to change the television on Tasha. Of course, it was said with a healthy dose of fear and respect, as the joke was that only the Avengers knew how truly terrifying Natasha was - it was a joke on everyone else, really.

Soon, though, both Tony and Thor's laughter fades into silence. It is a comfortable silence, one where they both get lost in the flow of memories that they have shared together over so many years. It is nostalgic and soothingly simple, and the gentle ease with which the night passes seems to smooth over the roughened edges of Tony's emotions. He doesn't feel so ripped open or raw, and maybe now he can actually sleep instead of worrying himself down with circular logic and panicked reasoning. With the length of the day wearing down on him, Tony forces himself to his feet, aching and sore though his knee is. "I think I'm gonna head back to my room now, Thor. I'm pretty tired after that party".

Thor nods, standing as well, before clasping a hand to Tony's shoulder with warm familiarity. "I will have a servant lead you back to your chambers". The smile that lights up Thor's face has dimmed a little over the night, but it's still there, just a little bit sadder than before. "On behalf of my brother, I apologize for what has happened today".

"Not your fault or your problem, big guy", Tony reassures. "Besides, it's worth it to hang with you again".
"Then I will see you tomorrow". Thor steps back, allowing Tony to walk back up the path and to the entrance of the garden. There is already a servant waiting there - probably summoned with some magic or something - and Tony doesn't even question that as he follows the man. He's too tired to ponder magic or Loki or how he's going to handle the next twenty-nine days. They are all questions for the morning, when he's too sore and worn out to get out of bed. So Tony's brain falls uncharacteristically, if mercifully, silent, and he doesn't even notice the passage of any time as he limps back to his assigned rooms, just as he doesn't pay any attention to falling into bed or how there is a handkerchief missing from where he had tucked it away.

Chapter End Notes

A word from the artist:
"For some reason, Loki in a high ponytail really appeals to me, maybe because that's more comics Loki than MCU Loki. I just get preoccupied with Loki's hair sometimes, okay? Don't judge me".
So it was another day, another fight breaking out in New York City. The baddie of the day was Loki this time, which was good as it normally meant a tricky fight with lots of monologuing and failed brotherly bonding, but Loki's fights tended to have less casualties or property damage too, which made most of the team and Tony's wallet happy. Not that any of the Avengers' fights ever really dented Tony's net worth, as most of the cost fell to the government, but still, it was the thought that counted. And that it was Loki also made the day a little more special, as Tony had been anxiously awaiting the magic god's next attack.

"Sir, the prototype hasn't been properly tested", JARVIS warned, but Tony scoffed behind the face plate of his Iron Man suit.

"That's why we're using it now", the genius drawled, shooting off a few repulsor blasts from the air. The two Loki clones that had been sneaking up on Clint's position disappeared, and Tony moved on through the sky, the HUD of his suit tracking the enemy movements for him. Unfortunately, Tony had yet to find a way to distinguish between real Loki and the Loki clones; he did have a magic detector, but Loki and his clones all lit up the thing like stoners on April 20th, so it was pretty useless. Shooting the Loki clones with repulsor blasts or hitting them with electricity was the only way to really know, as that cleared them away pretty fast - a fact that Tony attributed to how energy was used in magic, so it was like they could 'short' the clones out.

But he didn’t have time right now to play with Loki's little army, instead searching for the actual god himself. Tony wanted to try out his new toy, which was on its way inbound on the back of a JARVIS-controlled drone. Tony paused to hover over the center of the battlefield, eying the assembled baddies as they swarmed around in the heart of Times Square. There were a few Lokis that weren't on street-level, but standing on ledges and roof-tops while all laughing maniacally. Tony took a few pot-shots at those, making most of them poof away - all except one, actually, who dodged the shot before casting a quick glare in Iron Man's direction. Well, that seemed something like the real Loki would do, so Tony circled up higher, moving closer to the god. "Hurry it up, JARV".

"Of course, sir. And may I wish you the best of luck", the AI intoned dryly, but Tony didn't bother with rolling his eyes, not when Loki was right in front of him now. The god was smirking as he watched the hero approach - oh yeah, definitely the real Loki - but made no attempts to attack or flee. It looked like Tony was the day's lucky recipient of Loki's Villainous Monologue. Normally, Thor was the target of Loki's biting words, but the thunder god was wrapped up in several clones, trying to wrestle them off. The only good thing about Loki's monologuing was that it bought some time for whoever was listening, and Tony felt further relieved as a small alert popped up in his HUD just as he landed on the ledge next to Loki. 'Project Wet Cats on standby: awaiting activation'.

"Enjoying yourself, Stark?" Loki questioned with a naughty smile. Knowing that Loki was looking for a reaction, Tony kept his face plate down, kicking on the speakers instead.

"Not nearly as much as you are. Do you often play with yourself, Loki?"

"Only for a lack of better companionship". The god didn't even hesitate or pause, snarking back just as easily as Tony was capable of, which was another reason why Tony preferred facing Loki down in battle over other, less clever villains. "You are all so dull, I have to find other means to entertain myself".
"Well I just got a new toy", Tony said with a grin. "Let's try it out".

Then the drone was activating it's experimental technology with a sharp hum, and Tony felt a tingling pulse of some sort of energy push through him. Loki, who had quickly realized that Tony had some trick up his sleeve, took two steps towards the man before the anti-magic technology kicked in. All the color and rage drained from the god's face, and Tony watched as a look of utter terror washed over Loki. For a moment, Tony thought the god might try to run, but they were quite a ways up on the building, and there was nowhere to go but off the edge, which was extremely dangerous if not entirely suicidal.

But then Loki's anger was back in full force, and while Tony had thought Loki was always manic, that was nothing to compare to the absolute insanity in his features now. Loki charged haphazardly on the narrow ledge, spear stabbing out at Tony while he screamed. Shell-shocked by what he was seeing, Tony didn't react - he couldn't react to this overwhelming madness that had taken hold of someone who was supposed to be clever and vicious, not savage and disturbed.

A large green fist saved Tony from being run through, though, and Tony only blinked as the Hulk was plowing into the wall before him, smashing Loki into the building they were standing on. The whole structure shook as Hulk went wild in fighting, forcing Tony to take to the air. He considered following the Hulk and Loki's fight to lend support, but the Hulk could easily handle himself, and there were still clones scattered about and being nuisances - so the things were self-sustaining. Tony made a mental note of that.

"JARVIS, keep Loki in range and monitor him for any changes. I want any data you can get me". If 'Wet Cats' worked, then Tony would look into installing it in his suit, or maybe creating portable versions for the rest of the Avengers. An affirmative from JARVIS saw the drone flying past Tony's shoulder and down into the building, following after the fight. Tony however, headed back down to street level, acting as air support for the team as they took down the Loki clones, of which there were still way too many.

Some time later, as the team was being forced to spread farther and farther apart to chase down clones, an alarm blared in Tony's ear. He flinched in the air, yelling at JARVIS to shut the damn thing up. "What the hell, JARV!"

"You are needed at the Drone's position, sir", there was something urgent in JARVIS's normally controlled tone, and that gave Tony pause. He stopped in mid-air and hung there, thinking for a long moment before changing direction to head back to the Drone, which was still in the same building on Time's Square. He kicked in extra power to his boosters, though, as JARVIS said, "Immediately".

Tony didn't even bother to touch down at the edge of the hole where Loki had been smashed through earlier. He just darted in, JARVIS setting a flight path that would take him through the broken floors and rubble. The rest of the team was sending in regular updates, but Tony didn't pay any mind to what they were saying, just taking comfort in that they weren't the reason for JARVIS's alarm. But if they had been, then the AI would have said so instead of being so disturbingly cryptic, which meant that JARVIS didn't know how to handle whatever it was that was happening. Tony frowned inside his suit, not convinced that he wanted to deal with anything that could make JARVIS hesitate.

Touching down on the lowest floor of the ruined building, Tony couldn't see much through the clouds of dust and debris clogging up the air, and each step was just kicking up more. Forced to rely on the HUD to tell him where the drone was, Tony wasn't paying too much attention to what was in front of him, and he almost missed the strange wet, sucking sound that was coming from his side.
But he did hear it as the comms fell quiet, and turning, he could really only make out the silhouette of a dark heap of rubble which was moving minutely. He stopped, whispering inside his suit even though no one but JARVIS could possibly hear him. "What is that, JARV?"

"Sir", JARVIS was just as quiet as his creator, as if Tony's unsettled feeling was catching onto him too. "That would be Loki".

Tony took two quick steps forward, hands coming up in a defensive position, but he never fired off a shot. Instead, Tony stopped where he was standing, only barely controlling the urge to gag or vomit, though it was a hard won battle. Because it was Loki, but that was very hard to tell under the sheer amount of blood and rubble that covered the god. Somehow, Loki was still breathing, though each exhale brought blood gurgling up through his lips and his arm was broken in multiple places, both of which were obviously painful. Oh, and there was that rebar beam sticking up through the god's abdomen - that was probably pretty shitty too.

"What the fuck!" Tony exclaimed, and maybe Loki had super-godly hearing, because even though there was a hole in his chest that should have killed him, Loki's eyes cracked open, and he looked at Tony. But then whatever strength the god had left him, and Loki slumped back against the rubble beneath him, a sickening squelch coming from his chest as he slid just a little farther down the beam. Instantly, Tony was at his side, helmet folding up so that he could call out to the god, trying hard not to panic at this disaster. "Loki! Loki, open your eyes back up, c'mon!"

Shit, if the god died, then Tony was dead. Thor would kill him for letting Loki die like this, especially if Tony could do something to help. And Bruce would withdraw into his shell again, because even if this was Loki, the scientist hated it when his greener half caused such tragedies - Bruce would take this to heart and bear the guilt himself. Despite that all, though, there was a calculating voice in the back of Tony's head warning about a trap, but this was something so far beyond what Loki had ever done before that Tony just couldn't really buy into that.

There was something more to it than just misplaced guilt for Tony - in a cave built of cement and rebar, with Loki on his back with a hole in his chest and coughing on his own blood. There were parallels to that which Tony didn't want to think too hard on, but it did force him into moving, one hand looking for a pulse at the god's neck. There was no relief, however, when he could feel the weak fluttering of a heartbeat, because he had seen Loki take hits before but nothing ever like this. He honestly never thought the god capable of being so well beaten and abused.

"JARVIS, what... What the hell do I do?" Tony choked out, free hand hovering about uselessly. He wasn't a doctor, he couldn't handle this, but shit, what choice did he have with Bruce all Hulked-out and the rest of the team blocks away. "Fuck".

Using a laser cartridge, he cut away the metal rod on both sides of Loki's body, quickly wrapping an arm around the god to keep him from falling. Loki gasped against the pain of shifting, which led to a harsh coughing fit and more blood. Without further prompting, Tony found himself trying to shush and calm the god in his arms. "C'mon Loki. Can't you just heal yourself up? You're a god - you say it yourself all the damn time".

But JARVIS interrupted Tony's panicked rambling. "Sir, your prototype..."

"What?" Tony's eyes widened, and as Loki's heartbeat continued to slow, he barked at his AI. "Shut it down! Shut the damn thing down, JARVIS!"

The drone - which Tony had mistakenly forgotten about - powered down it's equipment, though still
hovering nearby. The reaction from Loki was immediate - green and gold sparked along his skin, and the god's eyes flew wide open, though he didn't appear to actually be seeing anything. Loki arched away from Tony's arms, a hand coming up to rip the remaining metal from his chest, and only years of fighting kept the man from passing out at that sight. Even worse was the wet sound of flesh and blood moving and being pulled against, but Tony held it together somehow.

It only took a minute or so for the magic to finish its work and then Loki was leaning heavily against Tony's chest, looking exhausted but entirely alive. A sigh of relief escaped Tony as he trembled in his suit. Only after a moment did he realize that Loki was looking up at him, though not making any move to get away.

"Stark". Loki's voice was shot to hell, rough and abused from his fighting and customary battle cry. "What are you doing?"

That was a damn good question, but the comms were squawking at Tony - he hadn't checked in for a while now - and he really couldn't be arsed to reflect on his actions at the moment. "Just get the fuck out of here".

Loki didn't hesitate after that, pushing himself up using Tony's shoulder, then taking a few steps away before disappearing in a dark swirl of magic. Tony immediately backed away from the rubble too, taking back off through the building as his face plate snapped shut, reassuring his teammates that no, he was really fine. But he skipped the after-battle debrief that day, and he avoided mentioning anything about why he had peeled away from everyone else. Instead, he got shit-faced and headed straight to his lab in the Tower. He smashed up 'Project Wet Cats' methodically, deleting all project plans from any database that they might ever possibly have been found on, and then he drank even more. Eventually he blacked out, waking up to the chaotic mess of his lab and Iron Man suit, but that only meant he just needed to drink a little more until unconsciousness welcomed him, and Tony could finally get some rest.
Tony is not a morning person.

This is hardly a new development in the genius's life, of course. According to Pepper, Tony suffered from a very basic problem that was present in every corner of the universe - inertia. When Tony was awake, he wanted to stay awake, and when Tony was sleeping, he wanted to remain sleeping. It was only when an outside force was applied - such as liberal amounts of coffee or alcohol, sleeping pills, or scary redheads - did Tony ever change course.

So no, mornings were never a good time for Tony Stark, and they had only gotten worse over the years, especially after his retirement from crime-fighting. Now, age and injury made waking up a painful affair full of stretching and groaning. And if he had really taxed his body the day before, like by walking a long distance across a spangly magic bridge and then partying for a good portion of the night before falling asleep in tight leather with large metal buckles, then he would be punished for his transgressions by sharp joint pain and a never ending ache.

Getting up the day after such physical activity is more than Tony can handle most of the time, so he doesn't even bother to try. Just lying back now, he stares at the ceiling of his rooms, trying to ignore the soreness in his lower back. He did make a fair attempt at stretching or popping his spine, but that didn't help at all, and that isn't even touching upon how his knee or feet will react to moving. If anything, though, it gives him plenty of time to think on his actions from the day before.

His immediate reaction is to be a little ashamed of how he had behaved the previous night. The whole thing with the fruit was just completely uncalled for and more than a bit ridiculous. He isn't exactly proud of his alcohol intake either. It could have been much worse, for sure, but it could have been better too. The only comfort Tony can really take is that he hadn't completely lost control, nor does he feel compelled to drink right at the moment. So he hasn't completely failed in his sobriety yet; that is something worth celebrating.

But still, he can't allow Loki to get to him so easily, and even if the god does manage to worm his way under Tony's control, he can't turn to drinking that way. That might have been how he dealt with all the secrecy and emotions before, he isn't that same man anymore, and he cannot go back. Not after everyone has helped him and supported him - not after he's done so much to make things better.

Loki, though... Loki still sets off phantom pains in his chest, and then Thor's insinuations that maybe Loki does actually feel something for him, and has felt that something since the beginning, makes a little spark of emotion too similar to hope glow in Tony's chest. That feeling is no more welcome than Loki's advances the night before. It's just too much and too late, or so Tony thinks at least, and now it's a matter of convincing Loki of that same thing. It won't be easy, of course, but to make it through this whole month, he needs Loki to back the fuck off.

Maybe he can convince Frigga or Thor to interfere, and if not them, then the rest of his teammates will stand in.

At that, there is a knock on the door to interrupt Tony's musings. It's a polite noise that is meant to be
courteous and respectful, and quiet enough not to wake him if he's still asleep, but it's followed by heavy pounding and an obnoxious voice. "Get your lazy ass out of bed, Stark!"

"Why don't you make me, asshole!" Tony yells back, grinning widely as Clint throws open the door and bursts in, the rest of the Avengers following. Tony feels lighter already, Clint's rambunctious energy and Thor's beaming smile doing a lot to help with his morning lethargy. Bruce is smiling too, and Tasha's wearing her fondest creepy stare. Steve sighs, bringing up the tail of the group and shutting Tony's door behind him. It was probably Steve who had knocked first, before Clint had taken over. Now, the archer is practically vibrating at the end of Tony's bed, and it makes the genius smile even as he struggles upright while trying not to move his lower body. "Who the fuck let Clint into the sugar bowl this early?"

"It's not early, you're just a lazy fuck", is Clint's reply, but Thor speaks over him as Tony sticks his tongue out in a childish mope.

"Aesir are fond of having sugared fruits and honey mead to break their nightly fasts. Clint overindulged". Thor claps a hand onto Clint's shoulder, making the hit purposely heavy to nearly knock the archer off his feet. Clint responds with a hyper growl while Tasha rolls her eyes and Bruce sits by Tony on the bed.

"He wanted waffles", Tasha shares, folding her arms across her chest and watching the two idiots wrestle each other onto the floor. "But Asgard hasn't even figured out electricity yet, let alone waffle irons".

Tony laughs, dutifully ignoring how Bruce is eyeing him. The doctor is obviously worried about how Tony is doing this fine morning, and it had become nearly routine now to just let Bruce poke and prod at him whenever he wished. If Tony didn't, then he would get a face full of guilt from Bruce's best puppy face, sometimes even with a sneaky little stinger of 'I'm just trying to be a good friend. Isn't that what we are?'. So now, he lets Bruce do whatever the hell he wants, no matter if Tony hates how it drew attention to his own shortcomings. It is just easier watching Thor and Clint going at each other playfully while Steve tries to get them to stop.

"This can't have been comfortable to sleep in", Bruce says, forcing Tony's attention back onto him.

Sighing, Tony nods, looking somewhat sheepish. "I didn't know how to get it off", he admits, and the timing is perfect because Thor and Clint have finally stopped, so they all get to hear that fun little tidbit. Clint snorts and completely cracks up, still riding high on his sugar rush. Tasha and Bruce both smirk in amusement, and even Steve chuckles, easing away his annoyance with having to break up a fight already today. "I was really tired, okay? Not my fault they have to make everything so damn tricky up here".

Thor laughs, not at all insulted. "Only the formal wear is ever this complex, friend. Casual clothing is a little simpler".

"How did you even get into this?" Steve questions. He has moved around to the other side of the bed, pinching at the leather with a curiosity he hadn't expressed the night before.

"There was a servant kid", is Tony's answer, shrugging away Steve's hand with an arched eyebrow - only Bruce gets touching privileges. "His name was Dagan. He was the one that delivered this and he helped me get dressed too".

As Tony talks, his eyes drift over the group, landing lastly on Thor. The god has gone a little tense as
Tony spoke of the kid, and there's something more to it than just recognition. So Dagan's got a story - and one that the Crown Prince of Asgard is familiar with - but Tony's not too put off. Everyone's got something that they don't want to talk about, Tony especially, and he's got no reason to be suspicious or even mildly worried. If there was a real threat, then Thor would speak up without hesitation, so it's probably just an unpleasant story. Maybe the kid's gotten picked on a lot, or he might be an orphan. A normally quiet part of Tony's brain supplies that feudal lord's sometimes took on orphans as page boys, so what's to say that doesn't happen in Asgard?

Decided, Tony let's the Thunder god keep his silence, and promptly forgets the problem entirely as Bruce starts to tug at the jacket on Tony's shoulders. "Hey", he starts to protest, but Bruce just glares a bit and keeps tugging.

"You've already missed breakfast", the doctor says commandingly. "And I don't care if you just want to stay in today - in fact, I would recommend it - but you're getting changed while we're here to help".

"But mom", Tony whines, but he doesn't argue as Bruce gets the jacket off and Steve starts working on the buckles of the leather bits. Eventually, he's down to the tunic, half-heartedly listening as they all talk about what they want to do during the day. It's seems they're all going to get the royal tour today, but Tony knows he's not up for that, and a quiet day in sounds better. The pants and chaps are to come off next, though, and that isn't something Tony is willing to suffer through with everyone hanging around. He loves his stupid team, but barring lots of alcohol or grievous injury, they aren't getting into his pants.

Steve is, fortunately, too modest to even try and reach for Tony's belt, but Bruce has no such problems when he's in full-on doctor mode, so Tony is forced to shove him away. He grins at Bruce to ease the suddenness of the move, but Bruce just looks at him seriously. "I can handle this, Doc", Tony dismisses. "I'm a big boy now".

Bruce sighs, but gives in, and no one else will press the issue. Except Tasha, of course, but she reaches down to rest a hand on his knee instead, the light pressure enough to make Tony wince. "What's today at, Stark?"

"Captain America", Tony states evenly, but Tasha presses just a bit harder, eyebrow arching up as she spots the lie. Tony gives in with a hissed, "Fine. It's Hulk". He's using his very own pain rating scale, the one he had come up with under the influence of morphine and had kept ever since. He thought it was clever at the time - Bruce was the lowest level of pain, then Clint and followed by Natasha, Steve, Iron Man, Thor, then Hulk. Each level corresponded with how hard that Avenger could hit, though Natasha only beat Clint because she was fucking scary as fuck, and Iron Man beat Steve just by virtue of it being Tony who made the scale. Having pain at Hulk level meant a very bad day for Tony.

Nodding, the assassin pulls her hand away. "Not going on the tour, then". It isn't a question, and no one needs any further explanation.

Tony answers anyway. "Nope, just gonna hang around for a bit. Maybe actually unpack now, since I didn't have time before".

"I will have someone bring food to your chambers", Thor states simply. "and they will also provide anything else you might need".

Only nodding to signify that he understands, Tony silently wills everyone to leave. He doesn't want
to hold up their entire day, and being the focus of the team's collective attention while he is feeling
this low isn't something he wants right now. They all get the hint, being far to used to this by now,
and Tony sighs in relief. Bruce is the only one that doesn't make a move for the door, but the rest of
them do, even Natasha heading out into the hallway and shutting the door behind them. Glancing
sideways at Bruce, Tony knows what's coming.

"Want to talk about last night?" the Doctor asks. It's a courtesy that only Bruce will ever give him,
asking like this. Everyone else would either ignore Tony's discomfort and press him for details, or
they would never ask in the first place, just waiting for Tony to open up on his own. But Bruce asks
instead if he wants to talk, and he'll respect what answer Tony gives, at least for the moment. It's
almost tempting to give in, too. Out of everyone - except maybe Thor - Bruce knows the most about
the relationship between Tony and Loki - but today, Tony isn't up for it. He would only feel guilty if
Bruce missed the tour of Asgard just to listen to Tony complain, and having a bit longer to parse all
of this on his own wouldn't be unwelcome.

So Tony shakes his head, running a hand through silvered hair. "Not right now, Bruce. Give me
until tomorrow, at least".

Acquiescing, Bruce finally stands and steps back from the bed, heading to the door. "You know how
to get us if you need something", he calls back, waiting until Tony grunts in agreement before finally
leaving. And now the genius is left alone and to his thoughts, which don't hesitate to take a darker
turn almost immediately. They spiral amongst themselves, and they all center around Loki - Loki's
actions, Loki's words, and Loki then versus Loki now. It occurs to him that maybe shooing everyone
away hadn't been the best idea, but it's a little late for that.

* * *

It's about an hour of silent thinking and struggled movements later before anyone brings Tony some
food. He's successfully managed to wiggle out of the leather chaps and boots, and the pants are
halfway down his legs when someone knocks at the door. Trapped on the bed as he is by the fabric
of his clothes, and with his knee too pained to get up anyway, Tony just calls out for them to come
in. It doesn't occur to him that maybe being halfway to naked might be a problem, and it's not as if
Thor had ever had any shame walking around in just his boxers on Earth. And if Thor can do it, then
Tony can too.

Dagan is the one who has brought him food, though, and as the teen opens the door, he get's a clear
view of Tony wriggling about on the bed in only a shirt and boxers. It has the kid lighting up redder
than Tony's Iron Man armor, which makes the genius laugh so hard that he gives up on getting
undressed at all. "Oh god", he cackles, "I don't think I've ever seen someone's jaw just drop like
that".

Scrambling to regain some composure, Dagan steps fully into the room with his eyes on the floor and
a small tray of food in front of him. The aghast look on his face quells some of Tony's mirth, but he
still can't help but find the whole situation funny. Besides, he's the one trapped on his bed, so it isn't
like the situation is only embarrassing for Dagan. "Just put that stuff down somewhere, kid, and
come help me out. I think I'm stuck".

For some reason that Tony can't grasp, the hem of the trousers is stuck at his calves, too tight to slide
down any farther, which shouldn't be possible because he could get the damn things on just fine last
night. Tugging blindly didn't help either, except to put undue pressure on his knee, and when even
the slightest pull made him gasp and shiver from pain, it wasn’t something he was having much luck with. There was even sweat beading at his temples, which Tony distractedly brushed at while he waited for Dagan to set his tray on a small table at the side of the room before approaching the bed.

Dagan has to kneel at the edge of the bed to properly reach over Tony, but once he does there is instant relief. Tony actually pays attention to what the kid is doing this time - just in case - and he realizes that the hem of the pants is hiding another leather strap inside, with a small slit to access the buckle. It’s what kept the trousers from riding up over his knees when moving around or sliding down when he tried to take them off, which is actually sort of clever, especially since the Aesir don’t seem to have elastic. After that, it’s easy to slip off the pants, and Tony kicks them away with a triumphant whoop as the teen smiles crookedly. Finally, Tony flings off the undershirt from the night before, and now he’s left wearing only boxers in a bed with a teenage alien boy.

Still not the worst thing anyone has caught him doing.

It's Dagan who seems to realize the implications of impropriety though, and he nearly throws himself off the bed and over to the table where the tray was. Tony huffs at that but lets it slide without further teasing, instead trying to massage away some of the pain in his legs so he can actually leave the bed today. It’s not fun to do, but if he doesn’t get up and walking around at least some today, then he’s going to be even stiffer tomorrow, which will just be worse. It’s a shitty situation either way, so he just bites down on his lip with each shock of harsh pain, trying to push through.

Thankfully, Dagan helps out. He's grabbed a small jar from the table and is now at Tony's side again, holding it out to the confused man. "Prince Thor asked me to bring along a pain relieving ointment with your meal, sir". Tony takes it, dipping his fingers in and rubbing the semi-translucent substance between his fingers. It's mildly sticky, but it rubs into the skin of his fingertips like lotion so he sets about smearing it into the aching muscles of his bad knee. Almost immediately, it starts to cool against the swollen, feverish tissue of the joint, and Tony sighs in relief. "That feels so good", he drawls. Even just this is pleasant enough, but he keeps rubbing and massaging, knowing that some of the pain will return when he gets up to get dressed again. "Thanks, Dagan".

The teen nods, setting the ointment on the small bedside stand and going back to his work of setting up a meal for Tony at. But despite Dagan's diligent focus on his task, Tony can still see the kid glancing up from time to time, watching Tony as he finally scoots to the edge of the bed and grabs his cane from the floor, getting to his feet with well-practiced ease. The stuff that Thor sent really does work miracles, as there's hardly any remaining pain when Tony moves over to his bags, which he still hasn't touched. He sets about opening them, though, looking for something to wear.

Immediately, Tony is sighing as he rifles through his own things. He should never have let DUM-E and the other robots pack his bags, but he had thought they would be fine under JARVIS's watchful gaze. Really, he knows that this isn’t the case, and while JARVIS would make sure that everything Tony would need is in the bag, the bots aren’t exactly tidy. Which means Tony's just going to have to dig through the mess of gadgets, toiletries, and clothing to find anything. And all this scattered through multiple bags just makes the searching that much more fun.

Eventually, Tony does manage to unearth a band shirt and loose-fitting jeans, plopping down onto the furry couch to slide them on. It's easier to do than fitting into Asgardian clothing had been, but then Tony's bought all his clothes with his bad knee in mind. Dressed now, Tony starts to pull things out of the bags, sorting everything out into piles that make up his own chaotic organization. Somehow, there are bits and pieces of metal and wiring twisted up in his clothing, so that when he's finished with the first of his four bags, there's already a pile of odd scraps at his feet. They aren't even workable pieces that Tony can really tinker with, though one of the bots - probably DUM-E -
included a screwdriver too. It makes a soft smile steal across his face, affection shining in his eyes for his absent little helpers.

The mess continues through all of Tony's bags, but he's in a pretty good mood for all that he has to sort through the junk. It's not lost on him that to the bots, each piece of scrap is a little bit of home that he gets to bring along - he knows that they all have a little stash of metal bits from each project he has worked on with them, like a collection of mementos. And from the pile gathering on the floor, it looks like they sent the whole damn thing along with him, like they're worried he'll forget about them or he'll be homesick. By the time he reaches the bottom of the last bag, he's practically laughing, though he stops as he comes across something unexpected that makes his smile turn bittersweet.

For some reason, JARVIS and the bots felt it necessary to include the MK V armor, folded up into it's portable form and stowed away like it belongs there. It's sweet that they had included it, though why they would do such a thing is beyond him. The armor is practically useless for him because he's not in any kind of shape to use it, though he does wear the metal tracking bracelets even now. Still, he's smiling sadly when he pulls the sleek red and silver case, holding it on his lap and tracing the seams where the metal joints meet.

A quiet cough brings Tony's attention snapping back to reality, and he sees Dagan standing beside the now set table, where a vast amount food is laid out. "Your meal, sir". Dagan's eyes are lowered, but he's peaking at the armor case between his bangs, and Tony thinks about showing it off, but the food smells amazing. Instead, he sets the case on the couch for later, then standing and moving to sit at one of the low chairs. It's not an overly comfortable piece of furniture, but it serves it's purpose as Tony sets aside his cane and begins to eat.

Dagan, however, remains standing off to the side, and Tony realizes the kid is just going to remain so, even though there is so much food that Tony had assumed they would be sharing. Swallowing down a mouthful of food, Tony turns to face the teen, smirking as he waves at him. "C'mon and join in. I'm not going to eat all this by myself". Dagan seems startled by that - and by everything Tony does, really - but he doesn't immediately move, so Tony stretches out to grab his arm, tugging the kid into the seat next to him. "I'm serious - eat something! I'll feel guilty if you're just left standing there while I pig out".

The teen finally takes to picking at a few pieces of the fruit that is laid out, but it's done entirely in silence. From the way Dagan's eyes keep flickering from his plate to the armor, sometimes briefly lighting upon Tony's cane, Tony knows that the kid is curious; he's just too shy to speak up. "You don't talk much, do you?" Tony finally says, breaking the awkward silence and capturing Dagan's mildly panicked attention. "I was hoping for some good conversation to go with this meal".

"I- I can talk", Dagan stammers. "What would you like me to talk about?"

"No no, that's not how this works! You've got questions - don't deny it, I know you do. So, kid", Tony smirks. "Ask away".

There's a long moment where Dagan looks like he's about to bolt, but then he blurts out, "What happened to your knee?"

Instantly, the teen is apologizing, realizing he must have made a mistake the moment that Tony's smile dims. The genius, however, just shushes him. "It's a lame story, really. Not some great epic battle or attack - just age catching up with me, I guess", Tony says with a shrug.
Dagan nods, though it's not a very satisfactory answer, Tony's sure. The teen seems to know that it's an uncomfortable topic, though, because he changes the topic. "Will you tell me a battle story, then? I would like to hear about what enemies you have faced down and defeated".

Grinning, Tony leans back in his uncomfortable chair, thinking back over all his favorite fights. Most of them weren't actually glorious battles where they reigned victory down upon their valiant foes - Tony's favorites were all the ones that had been so terrible that they were laughable. That doesn't really seem to be Asgard's modus operandi, though, and Tony probably wouldn't get the chance to share them at any of the feasts or such. Dagan has a bit of a clever look about him, for all that he's been stumbling almost laughably around Tony. I bet the kid would get a kick out of Doom's miserable attacks, though, Tony thinks, and so he launches into his very favorite story of some trounced-up old man who showed up in San Fransisco trying to kill everyone under the age of sixty-five for having bad manners with a horn.

* * *

He's got Dagan laughing, and that makes Tony rather proud of himself. He'd had to work for it for the past several hours, though, spending the whole afternoon telling stories about the most ridiculous villains he had ever faced down in battle. At first, all the teen would do was smile, often hiding it behind his hand, but then Tony told the story of one of Doom's failed magic attacks, where he turned all of SHIELD and the Avengers into hamsters and still got his ass beat by a pissed-off rodent Hulk. That got Dagan to really lose it, and the kid was laughing his ass of in no time afterwards.

The stories about Doom get the most out of him, but Dagan really does seem to enjoy anything that Tony talks about, even some of the more serious fights. It's a blast for them both, and Tony quickly stops paying attention to the time he's spending here, just focused on getting as many reactions as he can out of the shy kid.

It's a surprise, then, when there is a polite rap at the door, interrupting Tony's current story about a washed-out disco singer who tried to hypnotize Spiderman. He contemplates standing and actually opening the door himself this time, but he is lazy. So instead, he calls out loudly, startling Dagan, who had been staring nervously at the door. "Come in!"

And in walks the Queen of Asgard, casually strolling towards them with a polite smile. Dagan is instantly on his feet, bowing deeply with a guilty look on his face and a mumbled entreaty to Frigga. Tony follows after a bit slower, bowing too and grinning sheepishly. The Queen's attention, however, seems to focus more on Dagan at first in something like curious bemusement, but then she's smiling at Tony and approaching him, inclining her head slightly. "Good evening to you, Master Stark".

"Your Highness", Tony returns, "I thought we were past such formalities. Please just call me Tony".

"Of course, my mistake, Tony", Frigga laughs. "I was hoping to catch you before you left for the feast. I don't feel up to attending tonight, and I was curious if you would join me for a private meal".

"Ah, is it dinner time already?" the genius wonders, not having noticed that he had wasted the entire day.

"Yes, it is", Frigga comments, waving a hand at the table. "But it seems you have already eaten".

"I was..." Tony starts, before Frigga waves a hand at the table again.

"Just follow me, Tony. It's time for you to learn that you can't just eat whenever you please."
Tony blinks down at the dirty plates and half-eaten food. Maybe he should have gotten that cleaned up, because now he feels like a slob while staying as a guest in Frigga's home. "Actually, that was lunch", he says, shame-faced. "But we - Dagan and I - might have gotten a bit distracted".

"I can imagine so, as Dagan failed to attend to his other duties today", Frigga replies, eyes flicking to Dagan, who winces. But there is a fond smile tugging at the goddess's lips, so Tony knows that he hasn't gotten the kid in trouble, though he still feels bad for keeping him.

"That's totally my fault. I asked him to stay and keep me company. Really, though, I wouldn't let him leave, and-"

Frigga laughs again, brushing aside the explanations. "It is only his obligations to me that Dagan has missed, and I merely care in that I was worried for his absence when he is normally so attentive". Moving closer to stand between Tony and Dagan, she places a hand on the teen's shoulder. "Finding him here, however, is a welcome sight, as long as you welcome his presence".

"Of course. If it's not a problem, maybe he can join us for dinner", Tony suggests.

"I can think of no two I would rather eat with", is Frigga's beaming agreement, and there's a bit of a smile on Dagan's face too as he moves to the door, letting in a small team of other servants to clean up the current mess. A few men and women take care of it all, keeping their heads down as they leave while two more enter with the food. They don't address Tony at all, and they silently follow Frigga's soft spoken requests, but Dagan gets a few side-eyes that he dutifully ignores. But the mystery of Dagan is pushed aside to sit down to dinner with Frigga and the teen as a tasty array of meats and sweets are laid out.

The selection for this dinner is less beefy than what was served at the feast, with a lot more fruits and vegetables to choose from, and even a stew of some sort. The drink is just clear water, too, and some part of Tony is thankful that Frigga seems to be so attentive. He notes that there aren't any of those overly-juicy fruits, though, the ones that he had used to fuck with Loki, but that's probably for the best. Got to keep it PG-13 for the kid. But the fare is lighter while being yummy, and after talking all afternoon, Tony digs straight in. Frigga and Dagan are slower to eat, making polite conversation as the Queen enquires about her servant's day, asking after the stories he had gotten from Tony. With a mischievous smile, the teen touches upon a few of his favorite from the day, making Frigga laugh heartily while Tony tries not to snort up his food.

The whole affair is perfectly normal feeling, even though Tony is in an alien world eating with a Queen and a strange serving boy. It's almost familial, and some of the little things remind Tony of team dinners at the Avengers HQ. It's a kind of care-free fun that allows Tony to avoid thinking about Loki or his intentions, and what he should do about that problem. But of course, thinking that means that now Loki is on his mind, and he can't help but realize that if there was any time to get some answers, it would be now, when he's eating privately with Loki's own mother. And as Tony finishes sating his own hunger, he has little to do but fill the stretches of silence with his own voice. Somehow, that seems to be enough to force the engineer's mouth open.

"If you don't mind me asking", Tony starts with no little hesitance - things had been light and innocent so far, and this could very well change things, but he is just too curious to stop. "What happened with Loki?"

Dagan freezes in place, staring straight across the table towards a wall. The kid is a picture of
tension, like a hunted animal waiting for the predator to move on, not even daring to blink for fear of attracting its attention. Frigga, too, is tense, though she doesn't seem at all afraid. Tony catches a glimpse of something fierce flashing in her eyes, but it's tempered by the Queen's own soothing manner. "What it is you wish to know?"

Tony coughs to clear the tightness from his chest and throat, but he feels nervousness settle in him. There is no doubt that saying something wrong about the darker prince will have Frigga reaching across the table to rip his throat out, which is terrifyingly disturbing and maybe a little hot if only because he remembers how that looks on Loki's face. "Well, I just know that Thor dragged him back up here to be punished for everything, but that he was released some time ago". The scary edge of impending murder was leaving Frigga's eyes, so Tony spoke with a little more confidence. "I also know that Loki wasn't exactly well liked here, but no one seemed bothered by him last night, even if they weren't flocking to his side or anything like that. I'm just curious as to what I missed, I guess". Yeah, curiosity about Loki's suffering, that was the excuse he is going with instead of the 'why didn't he come back to me?' that is dying to escape from Tony's lips.

But Frigga - brilliant, insightful and wonderful as she is - doesn't need to hear Tony asking to know what it is he wants, but she doesn't mention it either. It's quickly becoming their established way of communicating. Tony doesn't ask or talk about his feelings, and Frigga doesn't call him out. Maybe it's not the best or most honest way of speaking with each other, but it works to tell Tony what he needs to know, so there's no point in challenging it. "He was brought home to be punished, Tony". Frigga's eyes are downcast for a moment, as if she's recalling exactly how that return party turned out. "But while most of Asgard would have seen him dead or hurt for his actions, I am still his mother and their Queen. While I might not throw around my power for more petty reasons, neither of my sons will be so hurt while I bear either title".

Frigga says that with such conviction in her voice and danger in her eyes that he doesn't doubt that for a second. It's too easy to imagine a beaten and bruised Loki coming home to the Queen's waiting embrace, and if anyone dares to take him away, she would shred them to their very core. In fact, it's even intimidating now, but that unrelenting wrath is directed at someone who is not present, and probably already dead or suffering by Frigga's will.

"Instead", the Queen continues, interrupting Tony's thoughts with an amused smile. "my son was imprisoned for several years, which I did my best to ease for him with small comforts and daily visits. Then we were attacked by one of the darker of the universe's peoples, which you know as the Chitauri". Something pained and haunted flickered briefly behind Tony's eyes, but he kept focused on Frigga, who also chose not to look away. "Thor was on your Earth at the time, and so we were left much weaker than we should have been, but the creatures did not aim to take our home. They were after Loki".

Fragments of memory flitted through Tony's head, falling into their proper order as the pieces of a puzzle come together. A fate worse than death, Loki had once told him, but when that promise never came to fruition - and when Loki had abandoned him - it was shut away in the darkest corners of Tony's mind. The little things are coming back to him, though, and now he remembers just why Loki had looked so weary and worn in their time together before. It wasn't from fighting the Avengers, or even from super-villain deals gone wrong, as very little could truly shake the mischief god's nerves. No, Tony can remember waking up to nightmares forcing Loki to thrash about and scream as he woke up, if he awoke at all. He can still recall the mantra of calming words that did nothing to ease the terrors of Loki's dreams - I'm here, you're safe, I'll protect you, I'll keep them away - but he wasn't there when Loki had needed him. Loki had been on Asgard, locked away and his magic weakened by the protective measures Thor spoke of, and Tony had never known that those creeping nightmares were coming to get the god.
He doesn't know now if he should feel guilty of that or not. He couldn't have known that was going
to happen, nor was it his decision for Loki to return to Asgard, but he had promised. A thought starts
to occur to him - maybe that's why he never came home - only for Tony to cut it savagely short, as
following that will only lead to madness and self-mutilation, which are both best left to the past. It's
safer now to return to his current company and their dinner, though the food has all been eaten and
the conversation is far from comfortable.

Tony forces himself to listen, and he takes some relief just from the sound of Frigga's voice. "We lost
many men to the Chitauri, and we would have lost more if not for Loki's help in defeating them".
The slight confusion shows on Tony's face, and Frigga accurately guesses the nature of his silent
question. "There were circumstances which brought about Asgard's people to agree to his release,
and which inspired Loki to fight rather than flee".

A sharp scraping sound of wood on stone breaks through the story, startling Tony into looking over
at Dagan. He had practically forgotten about the kid when listening to the Queen speak, but now the
dark-haired teen is standing, chair pushed haphazardly away from the table, and head down. It's odd
behavior when Dagan seems to prefer avoiding attention, but now Tony notices the tremble of his
hands, which are clenched into tight fists at his sides. Dagan's voice is shaking too. "Excuse me, Sir
Tony, my Queen. I have duties to attend to".

It's an obvious lie that Tony is hesitant to call the teen out on, but Frigga seems to have no problem
doing so. "You have nothing that cannot be put off, my child", she says, but her voice is kind, and
she takes Dagan's hand to pull him back down to sit. Even when he complies without argument, she
doesn't release his hand, holding on until he has stopped trembling, though he won't look up.

"The fighting lasted less than a day", Frigga explains as she turns back to Tony, who is even more
confused now. "But it was still a dark time for our realm, and for those in this palace especially".

"The Queen almost died", Dagan breaks in, quiet and shaky but with no hesitation. "She nearly lost
her life in defence of her soul-dark son".

Tony can feel something like horror rising up in him. He doesn't want to think of the goddess before
him as something vulnerable - as a person who can be swept away by death or destruction. Dagan's
reaction makes much more sense now, as Frigga seems to be something of a maternal figure for him,
and who would want to discuss how they nearly lost someone they love. Frigga only sighs fondly,
though, and she runs a hand along the teen's head to brush away a few stray hairs. She smiles
somewhat apologetically at Dagan, and then to Tony, who is still feeling a little lost for words and
choking on the tightness in his throat.

"Loki's magic was cut off from him when he was imprisoned, and he would have been helpless to
fight against the Chitauri when they inevitably reached his cell. It was a small matter of luck that I
happened to be visiting him at that time, and so I armed myself to stand as his protector against the
hordes". It should be difficult for Tony to envision the patient and sweet woman before him as a
warrior, standing armed and bloodied over the fallen bodies of her foes, but it isn't a challenge at all.
In fact, it's easy to see how Frigga's natural grace would translate into a fighting force to be reckoned
with, and there is no doubt in Tony's mind that this woman would defend her son until the danger
was gone at no matter the cost for herself. "I chose to defend him to the very best I could, though the
enemy army had not pulled out when I finally did fall".

Dagan twitches at that, and Tony mirrors the sentiment, but neither disrupt the tale. "The wounds
were neither deep nor lethal on their own, but over time and with exhaustion, I was succumbing. The
Lady Sif had managed to find me, however, and knowing that she could not save me and still fight off the Chitauri, she freed Loki from his prison and they fought together”. Frigga smiles at something in that memory, though Tony can't even guess what could be worth smiling about. "In the end, our foes were laid low and I was saved by my son's own hands. It was well, and Loki was finally allowed a chance to earn back the trust of our people".

The Queen stops speaking, as if this was the natural conclusion of her story, but still there is more that Tony would ask. This fight took place only a few years after Loki's imprisonment began, so there was still time - Loki could still have come back to him, and Tony had still been waiting. "So did you lock him back up or...?"

Frigga shakes her head. "I would not allow it, though many were wary of Loki still - they were too willing to see only darkness and rage in him. Lady Sif, however, had a change of heart, and she spoke in his favor, as did Thor upon his return to Asgard. In the face of these testimonies and protests, Loki was given a probationary punishment - he once again had access to his magics, but only if he staid under the constant scrutiny of Heimdall's gaze and within the realm".

"Like house arrest, but bigger", Tony mutters, mostly to himself, but Frigga agrees anyway, smiling softly.

"Yes. Of course, being as charming as he is capable of, it was not long before Loki came to carve a place for himself in Asgard". Frowning, Tony blinks down at the table as the Queen continues. "It was only just over five years before Loki returned to his position as Prince of Asgard, with all the rights to travel and the accolades that it afforded him. And while he might not have the overwhelming love or adoration of the masses, he has their trust as the Prince, and he uses that asset well".

Tony nods as if he's still listening, but the frown hasn't left his face and he's staring through the table with some force. Five years was plenty of time to come back down to earth; it was long before Tony had given up on their relationship, so why? It's a question that is stuck repeating in Tony's head - Why did you leave? Why didn't you contact me? Why didn't you come home? It's a dangerous spiral, and some part of Tony recognizes that Dagan and the Queen are still watching, but he doesn't really care even as Frigga speaks up again, instead just dropping his face into his hands.

"Dagan, please go ready the weaving room for me", Frigga is addressing the teen, but her eyes stay on Tony's panicking form. "I plan to work tonight and you will attend me".

The kid's gaze flickers between the Queen and Tony, hesitation and concern breaking across his face. "Of course, my Queen", he says as he stands, moving slowly and quietly against the auditory backdrop of Tony's panting breaths. As soon as the door clicks shut behind Dagan, Frigga has moved, kneeling at Tony's side with one hand on the back of his neck and the other on his forearm. She shushes him, and though Tony's a rather old man by now, it still feels like the vague memories he has of his own mother's comfort, held safely in warm hands as his problems were soothed away. It does help, and the whirlwind of thoughts in his head dies down to a more manageable speed as he slowly regains control over his own body.

As his panting returns to more steady breathing, Frigga pulls at his arms so that Tony's face is no longer hidden, taking one of his hands in hers. There is power in her grip, and the man uses it like an anchor to draw himself back into normalcy. "Thanks", he mutters when his voice manages to start working again, though it sounds somewhat choked.

Frigga doesn't answer that, just humming to herself in thought for a long moment. Whatever occurs
to her must change something, because her eyes turn from sad and worried to hesitantly optimistic. She clasps his hand tightly with both of her own now, and she speaks evenly. "I cannot claim to know every corner of my son's mind, Tony Stark, nor can I tell you why he acted as he did in concern to you. But I do know that after everything Loki has suffered in his life, he fears nothing more than to lose the love of someone he holds dear to him. He would not just abandon you without good reason to do so, and he will not hurt you again, should you let him in".

"You just want to see your kid happy", Tony mutters accusingly. It's not at all kind, and the Queen doesn't deserve it after everything she has done for him, but it's still there in Tony's head, and he let's it out.

"Of course I do", Frigga replies without hesitation or shame. "But I also know what Loki is capable of, and I do not believe him entirely blameless or harmless. I do not wish to see you hurt either, Tony". She sighs. "I would have you both happy if I could, and together, if that is were your happiness lies".

That's honest - or at least, Tony wishes to believe it is.

Straightening up in his seat, Tony's new calm seems to reassure Frigga, and she moves back to her own chair without comment. A pleasant quiet envelopes the room, and Tony uses it to refocus his thoughts on something less dangerous. "So Dagan...", he begins, and Frigga picks up on the unspoken enquiry.

"He's somewhat unusual - a loner in the heart of Asgard", she says with some pain, as if Dagan's suffering is her own. "It's not a story I would share without his permission, but it's a long one, and his troubles are many. In fact, they would lead me to ask a favor of you, for his sake".

Tony nods; he's always been a bit of a sucker for sob stories involving neglected or outcast children, and besides, Dagan kept him company all day. Tony wouldn't mind being able to return that comfort somehow. "Whatever I can do, your Grace".

"Then stay with him", Frigga replies, lips quirking up slightly from the flirtatious nickname even as she doesn't look happy. "He is very fond of you already, for both the kindness you have shown him, and also for the skills you both share".

"I wouldn't mind having a guide", Tony agrees with a grin. "And the kid's a good listener; it would be my pleasure to keep him around".

"Then that is what we shall do, though he does sometimes have other requirements to meet and cannot always be at your side".

"I'm a somewhat responsible adult, Frigga. I think I can handle myself at least a little", Tony responds cheekily. "But I'll take the kid whenever I can get him".

Rewarding Tony with a pleased smile, Frigga stands. "Thank you, then, Tony Stark. If you have need of me, just ask someone to guide you to my personal chambers". By some silent signal, a handful of servants shuffle into Tony's room, quickly clearing away the plates of the finished dinner. Their presence destroys the informal air that had persisted throughout the night, and suddenly Frigga is the Queen again, and Tony stands as is expected of him, bowing slightly before her.

"And if I might ever be of service to you, m'lady", he says as he's still bend forward, eyes on the floor. Frigga is quick to return the bow with a small curtsy of her own, nodding to acknowledge his
words before stepping back and out of the room. The whole team of servants follows immediately, taking all the mess with them and leaving Tony to go to bed. At least tonight he might get a rather good bit of sleep, since he isn't trapped in that Asgardian frippery anymore.

Chapter End Notes

And now, a word from the artist:
"DUM-E and the bots packing Tony a screwdriver is the cutest thing ever. It's like the Tony Stark version of a binky."
"Poor Loki. He must think he's being all sly and clever, but everyone else just ships it really hard and covers for him because he doesn't seem to know how to flirt like a normal person. Oh well, at least his mama loves him. But seriously, when even Thor has you figured out, it's time to hand in your sneakiness badge. Especially if your cunning plan keeps getting undermined by [SPOILERS?]."
He had needed a vacation - that's what Tony had told his teammates and Fury, at least. In truth, heading out to Malibu was an escape from the incessant questioning of Tony's actions, but after dealing with Project Wet Cats, the man could hardly care. He still hadn't talked with anyone about it, still hadn't debriefed properly even four days later, and while it was safe to say that the team was concerned, Fury only cared that Iron Man wasn't going to be pitching in to help for a while.

But how the hell was Tony supposed to sit down and tell everyone what had happened - how his own work had nearly killed someone (again), or how he had let a super villain walk free to avoid that. Talking would expose too much of himself, of his own doubts, to the team, and while he trusted them as much as he trusted anyone, this was not something he would give them. Besides, it's not as if everyone would support his actions. Natasha and Clint wouldn't - they were assassins, and if anyone on the team could let Loki die slowly, it would be Clint. Steve and Thor, though, would have agreed, and Bruce too, though all for different reasons. Thor just didn't want to see his brother dead, while Bruce would want to avoid the guilt, and Steve would rather see 'proper justice'. None of them, though, would understand the eerie feeling of seeing yourself in a dying enemy - of drawing parallels that had never been noticed before and of sympathizing with that pain.

Plus, to properly explain would mean talking about Tony's magic dampening project, and that would call into question his destruction of it. He was spared from that conversation at the moment only because he had kept 'Wet Cats' a secret project, not even sharing it with Bruce. Before, it was merely for the chance to surprise everyone, then gloat and celebrate in front of their awed faces. Now, though, the team would insist that he rebuild the drone and its field generator, which he would under no circumstances do. Even with the assurance that the technology would never be stolen or copied - which would be impossible to promise - Tony would have to refuse, and he knew that only Bruce would ever be able to understand that decision. After all, even if they don't use it to directly kill or harm Loki, it has other uses for subduing any number of their magical enemies.

But no. It's easier to just forget that the project ever existed, to delete it entirely from existence and then never speak or think of it again. It's easier to ditch out on his team, to take his space and maintain radio silence until he can come up with a believable lie. And it's by far easier to drown himself in the familiar darkness of alcohol than to remember the utter terror of Loki's expression, or how the god slumped with uncaring abandon as Death sought to take him.

Unfortunately, even as Tony cradled a tumbler of expensive liquor in his hands, he was given no reprieve. Instead, there was the crackling energy of magic well-used slipping along the edges of his dulled senses, and a wary god, millennia old, stepped out into a modern paradise of technology.

There was no warning from JARVIS, as the AI was in a system reboot of sorts, shut down while Tony manually went through every single line of code on his servers, deleting any notion or mention of his ill-fated project. When JARVIS was restored, there would be nothing in his data to even hint at the aborted work, and JARVIS would know nothing of what had happened in that building, nor would he ever be able to find out. The itch of Tony's shame under his skin was more powerful than any guilt he felt for tampering with JARVIS like this, because while this felt too much like playing god with the mind of a sentient creature, no one could ever know what he had done or almost did. And as unhackable as JARVIS might be, that information could not be allowed to exist in any way.
So even as Loki walked into Tony's own sanctuary, stalking before panoramic glass windows to stand before Tony's seat on the low couch, he went unmarked and unhindered. That did nothing to ease the tension or weight of the god's bearing, and dressed as he was that moment in Tony's penthouse when banter and wit turned to shattered glass, it made quite a terrifying image. Here and now, the god had a chance to do as he couldn't on the day of that invasion - the picturesque windows would not keep Tony from plummeting into the ocean below, and there was no JARVIS to save him with a timely deployment of a suit. There was only a powerful god and a singularly mortal man; one standing at rigid attention with a piercing gaze on his opponent, and the other clinging to alcoholic reassurance as he stared blankly at lines of code lit up on his display, completely incomprehensible to any but himself.

"Stark". Tony didn't blink or move, and gave no outward acknowledgement of his visitor. His mind was too busy being torn between the simultaneous desires to run and to study. He clamped down on memories of his name in that same voice, only rougher and edged with blood, but he also trembled, raging with the desire to trace the fear in Loki's eyes to it's source, to track it down and eradicate it, for if it could terrify a god...

Only as he finally moved, aching and cold body nearly creaking as he shifts forward slightly to set aside his lifeline of scotch on the coffee table before him - only as Loki's gaze flickered across his form and the god grew minutely tenser - did Tony realize that it was himself that inspired such a fear, and didn't that just burn.

"Loki". And that was the first word to pass through Tony's lips since the incident with the god, since arriving in Malibu and shutting down JARVIS. It's cracked by the tightness of Tony's throat, blackened by the guilt and weight of self-deprecation that he can never quite escape. There's relief in it too, that now Loki is here and not dying like he remembers, that maybe now the god can come take away the shame through violent revenge, will make Tony pay in flesh for what he has done to make a god afraid. Surely that one word was more revealing than Tony would like, but Loki seemed not to trust what he hears, instead taking to the well-worn and familiar paths of egotistical posturing.

"You must think yourself invincible to take up residence so far from your teammates", Loki mocked with a sharp grin, turning away slightly as if Tony's presence in the room was worth no notice. But Tony didn't rise to the bait, didn't argue or return with a quip and a cocky smirk. "Did you think I wouldn't return to kill you? That you could so magnanimously let me go, as if that would save you from my wrath?" That was still not enough to rouse Tony's anger, and Loki's mask of superiority was cracking around the edges. "I will make you pay for your insolent attacks on me, Stark! You are weak and pathetic - a man who hides behind a metal face, too much a coward to fight as himself! I will destroy you! I will expose your weakness to the world, and your legacy will crumple! You are a man, while I am a god above you! I have nothing to fear from you!"

"Yes, you do".

Tony's interruption was whispered, going almost unheard in the face of Loki's tirade. It was not a promise or a threat, just the absent-minded statement of a terrifying truth. But that alone was enough to bring the god up short, panic flaring in his eyes and guard raised as he turned to face Tony. And there was the fear that haunted his thoughts; it didn't suit Loki, who looked like the hunted prey of a vicious beast. Tony finally looked up, something dark shadowing the brown of his eyes as he met Loki's own gaze. "You do fear me, because I hurt you. Not physically, no - because you don't fear death, and that pain wasn't pleasant, but it was manageable. I hurt you when I took away the one thing that had never failed before, the one thing that you have always had to cling to before. I stole away your magic, and no one else has ever done that". 
Loki flinched, a shudder that wracked his entire body, eyes unfocusing as if he remembered what it felt like to lose a piece of himself. Something in that drove Tony to stand; maybe it was misplaced anger over Tony's emotional state, or maybe it was some kind of concern for the damages he had caused.

"You fear me, Loki", Tony spat, taking a few steps forward so that there was no longer any furniture between them. "Asgard can't seal up your magic; I know for sure, Thor told us. And who else is there that can even compete with the Aesir in magic? I bet you don't even know how to cut someone off from their magic, and if you can't, then no one can!" Tony laughed in self-disgust, the sound bubbling like acid through his chest. "No one but me, at least. Me! Some stupid Earthling who doesn't even believe in magic, and I figured it out all on my own!"

"I should kill you". Even as he backed away from Tony, Loki was growling. "I will kill you and burn this world to the core!"

"No, you won't", Tony replied, expression blank again as he keeps moving, trapping Loki between himself and the window. "You should, though, and you know it. Even if you destroy every note I have or every prototype I have made - too late, by the way, I already did it - the knowledge is still here, locked up in my head". A finger tapped to his temple, Tony didn't react to the knife suddenly in Loki's hand, or how it was raised up to the genius's throat. "You should kill me, Loki. I kind of wish you would already, but you won't, and we both know that".

Loki hissed, pressing the knife forward until Tony felt the cold of it on his skin. "I will kill you, pathetic whelp, and I will enjoy it". But the knife disappeared instead of slicing through Tony's skin, and Tony didn't react. "I will kill you when I have cleared my debt".

That got Tony's attention. It was a deviation, something different and unexpected to snap the engineer away from his own dark thoughts. "What debt?", he was compelled to ask, curiosity starting to sluggishly fill the cracks in his mind.

Scoffing, Loki vanished, only to reappear at Tony's back and a safe distance away. "You saved my life, fool, and I am indebted to you now".

"You didn't care if you died", Tony pointed out. "Why would you care if I saved you?"

Loki's midnight green eyes flickered, and he smiled in disgust. "While my life may be worth little value, I am hardly a savage beast. I will kill you in fair blood".

"I don't want your debts. Just go for it - save us both some time".

"This is not a game, Stark", Loki spoke with a glare. "And I have no desire to play with you now. Tell me how I might repay your actions".

There's nothing, though, that Tony wanted from the god. Well, peace of mind, yes, but that was beyond what Loki could give him, and it wasn't as if Tony was really lacking in material goods or even friends. There was nothing, but - "I want your story".

The words seemed to come from nowhere, but still Tony wasn't surprised by them. Loki had already incited his curiosity before, and it was only growing worse as the god continued to teeter between panicked insanity and arrogant stability. Because while the feeling was familiar to Tony, and while he could see the similarities, there was too much unknown for him to quantify Loki properly. Tony
didn't want to just sympathize with the symptoms, but to understand the problem, too. He wanted to know just how much Loki had been and could be, and he needed to know the whole of the truth to do that.

Loki, however, wore confusion plainly on his face, either not understand the request or not knowing where it came from. Tony explained. "I want your story, from start to finish. I want to know every last day of your life, and I want to know what you thought and felt during them. I want to hear about your family and your interests, the things that hurt you or made you. I want to know everything there is to know, and I want you to tell it to me".

"You dare!" The god looked enraged, scowling fiercely, but Tony could read the resignation in his eyes, even if token protests were still made. "You would ask me to give up my weaknesses to you - to tell you everything you might need to ruin me!"

"You're going to kill me anyway, so it doesn't even matter", Tony cut Loki off, feeling some normal excitement beginning to seep back into his bones.

Still, Loki growled, but he dipped into a low bow, accepting the deal. "As you wish, Stark".

"Good", clapping his hands together, Tony couldn't help the quirk of his lips in faint amusement. "But since I feel like this is going to be one hell of a long talk, we're going to have to save it for later. I've got to head back to New York soon, and you're going to leave”.

"I will not dance to your tune!"

"Yes, you will". Tony really needed to stop interrupting an angry god, but now that some of his normal snark was returning, he couldn't help it. "Look, don't get your panties all twisted, Dasher. We'll meet up in a month, when I'm back here again. I'll make sure to clear out a good long weekend, and you'll have time to think about how you want to do this. Then, we'll meet up and have that drink I owe you, and then you can kill me. It'll all be good".

Loki's glare wasn't softened at all, but he must not have had any arguments as he just vanished instead, leaving Tony to smirk at only air before snapping up his tablet again. He had to get JARVIS's code finished before he could head back to his Tower, and then he had to dig up a good excuse for another California vacation so he could make that meeting with an indebted super-villain. Finally feeling like he was coming back to himself, Tony sat down and got to work. He had a lot to do, after all.

Chapter End Notes

More words from the artist:
"That chapter was sooo tense. When Tony said "Yes, you do", I think I held my breath until somebody started talking again. Balls of vibranium, that's our boy. Agh, why do you keep writing so many things I want to draw?"
The morning of day three, the sun shines down on a significantly healthier Tony. Waking up, his body feels pleasantly loose, with no lingering pain in his muscles or joints. Even his knee is good, though a little swollen, but that ointment Dagan had brought is still on the nightstand and Tony makes good use of it. He still doesn't go to breakfast, though, as he isn't hungry at all, but he's at least up and dressed before anyone comes to fetch him, which seems like a very significant accomplishment on its own.

There is a knock on the door to interrupt Tony's glorious preening, however, and he opens it to find Bruce - just Bruce this time, which isn't really bad or hurtful, but Tony playfully pouts anyway. Bruce's only response is a long-suffering sigh and a shake of his head, though Tony can spot the laugh shining in his eyes. "Am I not good enough for the mighty Tony Stark?", the doctor teases.

"Oh come on, Brucie", Tony whines, letting the other man into his room. "You know I love you, but does no one else care? I could be dead! Or kidnapped, or sick, or injured, or..".

"Or just fine", interrupts Bruce, but still Tony won't drop the game, continuing to mope and sigh melodramatically as the doctor steps into the room. "Besides, Tony, they all went out early this morning. Thor promised to take them out to the royal hunting grounds, which means horseback riding and nature, which we all know you hate".

Folding his arm, Tony looks indignant. "I don't hate nature", he protests. "I just want it to go do nature stuff somewhere that's not near me".

"And horses?" Bruce shoots back knowingly, and eyebrow slightly raised.

Tony shivers in only half-feigned horror, "They're evil of the worst kind". He let's the matter go without any arguments though, knowing that his team really did care, which was why Bruce was here at all. "So are you going to be my date for the day?"

"More like your chaperone", the doctor returns. "Thor showed us the library yesterday and I wanted to check it out. You're coming with me".

"So forceful, Dr. Banner". Tony flutters his eyelashes at Bruce, cocking a hip out and trying to look demure. It's a laughable attempt, and the doctor's facade of controlled amusement falls apart, leaving the man doubled over and laughing. Smirking in victorious pleasure, Tony slaps a hand on Bruce's back, smiling at his hysterics. "C'mon, don't leave a man hanging. There are books to be read".

Bruce just shoves the genius away lightly, mindful of his cane, before righting himself, though laughter still threatens to bubble up at any moment. "You're an ass".

"And I'm a fine one at that", Tony jokes as he walks out of the room. "Now, onward to research". Shaking his head, Bruce follows his friend, smiling softly as he shuts the door behind them.
The library that Bruce shows to Tony is a huge maze. At some point, it must have started as something quite small, because instead of the large, expansive room that Tony was expecting, he gets a series of smaller, interconnected ones all lined with books. Tucked into the heart of the palace as it is, it seems as if they have had to expand through already existing structures, turning storage space and servant housing into more rooms to hold books, only knocking doors between them. It's all so confusingly labyrinthian, with no clear way of organization at all. How anyone could find a book in this place is beyond Tony, though he expects magic is probably involved somehow.

Despite how easily someone could get lost in the library, though, Tony likes it. That might just be because it feels so much more comfortable than the rest of Asgard, as it lacks the vaulted ceilings or metallic shine that everything else has. Instead, the library is dimly lit and the bookshelves are all made of a dark wood - silence reigns, too, which is so very different from the way the Aesir behave that it's almost like being in another world. And occasionally, as Bruce leads him on a wandering path through the rooms, Tony will notice a small reading nook, or a seat tucked halfway behind a shelf. It brings unbidden images of Loki forward - Loki reading in the study of his Malibu home; Loki always having a book near at hand; how Loki was pale enough to almost glow in the dim light of the magic candles he preferred to work by. It's not exactly what Tony wants to be thinking about at the moment, though, and it's worse that Bruce seems to catch on too, if the frown he's giving Tony is any indication.

A shake of Tony's head is enough to deter any line of questioning from the doctor, however, and eventually they have circled back around to the main entrance of the library, where an attendant is standing. Bruce immediately questions the man on books about the Bifrost and any other forms of interplanetary travel. Tony only listens half-heartedly, not feeling like joining in as his day has already taken a swing towards the depressing. Still, he's not ready to just give in yet, and there's a very good possibility that some space talk with his science bro will cheer him back up. So Tony doesn't protest when he and Bruce are told to take a seat anywhere they like, and that the books will be brought to them, instead just dragging Bruce to a table he had spotted a room over.

It's the wrong thing to do, as Bruce doesn't wait a moment longer to start with the questioning glances again, and Tony just knows that he's working up to asking something. The waiting around for it, though, is not how Tony wants to spend his morning, so he cuts the doctor off. "No, I still don't want to talk about it". And he doesn't, not at all. The information he's gotten from Frigga is still so fresh that he doesn't even really know how to feel about it, nor does he want to admit to the breakdown he had at the dinner last night. Besides, he hasn't made a decision either way about Loki, and he isn't anywhere near ready to. What he knows so far isn't enough, and he wants more.

For a moment, though, it looks like Bruce is going to protest, to push Tony into opening up, but the doctor shuts his mouth when the library attendant is back with a pitifully small number of books in his arms. There are only three total, and one looks more like a small field journal than an actual text. Tony can see the disappointment he feels echoed in Bruce's face, but that doesn't stop them from thanking the man and then each snagging a book, quickly getting them open and starting to read.

* * *

The day ends with little having been learned about wormholes or the Einstein-Rosen bridge that Jane Foster had been researching. For some baffling reason, no one in Asgard ever bothered to write down how the damn thing worked, or even how it was built, and for all that Tony and Bruce manage to uncover in the archaic texts, the fucking bridge might as well have predated time, always existing at the edge of Asgard. This is impossible, though, because they both know that the Bifrost had been
destroyed at one point, and then rebuilt. But it seems that Loki was the sole architect of the
reconstruction - at least, according to the library attendant - and he recommends that they speak with
the Prince themselves. Tony is sure as hell not going to do that, which means it's up to Bruce, who
has never exactly been close with the god, and there's no way that the doctor will go either.

It's a rather frustrating end to a long day, but things brighten considerably when the rest of the team
makes it back for dinner, rousing the two scientists from their study party and dragging them to the
feast. It follows in the same spirit of the first feast Tony attended, but it is smaller, and there are fewer
courses of food served. One thing that Tony notes immediately is that Loki isn't attending that night.
It should be relaxing, and now Tony can enjoy himself freely, but he isn't. It's always better to keep
an eye on Loki, after all, than to not know where the god is or what he is planning. But Tony makes
it through the night unscathed and still relatively comfortable, and when he falls into bed, there is a
small smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

* * *

Somehow, the next day finds Tony standing under the baking, alien sun in only biking shorts and a
black vest.

It's not at all how he had planned to spend the day - well, there hadn't actually been any plans, just
the general idea of staying inside and maybe finding Dagan too, because he had made a promise to
Frigga, but he hasn't seen the kid since. Instead, Tony is hot, sweaty, and feeling a bit self-conscious
because while he's no slouch, there is a large group of elite Asgardian warriors surrounding him, and
they could make anyone look tiny. It's Tasha's fault, Tony thinks, but it isn't, not really. Sure, the
redhead may have been the one who cajoled Tony into attending the sparring session with the
Warriors Three and Sif, but he's the one who hadn't been content with just sitting on the sidelines and
watching everyone else go at it. Nope, he had opened his mouth instead - always a calculated risk -
and now he was facing down an intent Sif in the center of the ring, with only a few minutes of
stretching to prepare him.

It couldn't have been helped. Clint's taunting about being a lousy fighter without the suit was hardly
serious, and Tony knows that no one really thinks that, but it still gets under his skin, especially when
his injured knee is brought into it. So he had boasted that he could fight just as well as anyone
present even with a bad knee, and that got the Aesir curious. Even Thor had never seen Tony
fighting since the accident with his leg, but there had never been a need for it, either.

Armed only with a cane against a well-trained, battle-hardened warrior, Tony is willing to admit that
he's more than a little scared. Sif has a way of reminding him of Natasha, and even though he knows
that the woman wouldn't actually hurt him, she sure is as intimidating as hell, especially like this.
Because Sif is eager for the fight, grinning at the rush of adrenaline in a way that Tasha never did.
The warrior is obviously experienced too, falling into a fighting stance with subconscious ease, and
staying relaxed in a way that has nothing to do with confidence. That is reassuring, at least - that
even now, Sif is treating him like a proper opponent, not preparing to go easy on him just because
Tony's older or injured or human. And yet, if he at any moment yields or gives in, the fight will be
finished with no damage to his image - none of the people here are enemies or competitors, even if
they aren't good friends.

Not that Tony Stark would ever give in without trying, though. He might be aged, but he still has his
pride and that's worth something. So even as Sif - dressed in leather training gear and holding a
blunted short-sword in one hand - circles slowly, he doesn't back down, instead taking slow, shuffled
steps to keep the goddess in front of him. Other than a slight wary tension in his muscles, Tony keeps
his stance basic, falling into the position he stands in normally, with his feet slightly apart and open, and his cane in hand with the tip to the ground. It's a good position to start in, and one that Natasha had practically beaten into his head until it was instinct to stand like that in every day life.

Then Sif lunges forward, and Tony moves.

He sees the sword coming down - a downward slash across the front of Sif's body. It's a basic swing; she's just testing Tony's limits, finding how far and how hard she can push him. So he reacts in kind, falling back on the most basic strike he knows. Tony flicks the tip of his cane up, right foot fading back to pull away from the moving sword as he snaps the cane up and across, striking at Sif's arm. It deflects the blow, turning the attack away from Tony's body, but doesn't quite stop Sif's forward momentum. Tony follows through, though, his left hand coming up to grasp the shaft of the cane, then lunging forward as he brings his hands together so that now he is attacking with the head of the cane, hooking it around the base of Sif's sword and pulling hard as she slides past.

It doesn't disarm her, but the tug does send the warrior slightly off balance, and she takes several steps away and out of Tony's range to reset. Tony's still rather proud of that move, though, as while it is meant to disarm, it's also intended for weapons much lighter than a sword, and he wasn't entirely certain it would work. The little burst of success is short lived, however, as Tony's forward lunge means that his weight lands on his right leg, and his knee twinges a little, pain flaring for a moment before settling into an ache. He's normally much more careful in how he spars and trains, but he might be showing off a little now, and he'll probably pay for it later.

Sif immediately launches another attack, this time thrusting at Tony's abdomen. Tony parries, putting his weight into the move as he twists the sword away from his body. But the goddess's Aesir strength is starting to come into play, and this time, the sword isn't so easily diverted. It hits up against his side, and though the edges are blunted, it hurts like hell. There is definitely going to be a bruise forming along his ribs, but Sif's attack doesn't stop, and Tony doesn't have time to think about his possible aches and pains.

Blows are rained down onto Tony, and he's doing his best to counter or parry each one, but Sif's much faster and stronger than he is, and he's being worn down quickly. There isn't an out that the genius can see - there is no winning scenario for him, because even if this is just some friendly sparring, Sif is not going easy on him. But hell if he's going to go down without getting in one or two good hits himself. He just has to make a move before he's too worn down to do anything.

Tony takes the first opportunity that presents itself. Sif crosses herself with another thrust, leaving a small opening at her side, and Tony jabs. He makes contact with Sif's armor but the move is a weak one, with little power behind it, and Sif doesn't seem to pay it any mind. She just continues forward, stepping away and falling into a guarded position. It's dissatisfying and Tony keeps his attention on looking for another opening. He wants to make a better impression than just this.

But Sif attacks again with a downward sweep, aiming for Tony's bad knee, and even though he gets his cane in front of the strike, he doesn't have the strength to stop it. The blade hits his cane and leg both, and pain shoots up through his limb - it's too much and he can't help the shout that tears it's way up through his throat. His knee gives out, and he starts to fall sideways, falling to one knee and left leaning heavily on his cane. Sif's pulled back her sword, but she's standing over him and it's pretty easy to see who has won. Smiling and flushed from exertion, Sif holds the sword to Tony's throat in mockery of a threat. "Do you yield, Tony Stark?"

Raising his free hand, Tony manages a small tug of a smile through his panting. "I yield", he huffs out, but even when Sif lowers the sword, he doesn't immediately move. He's exhausted, and as the
rush wears off, he's beginning to feel all the bumps and bruises that Sif has dealt him. And that's not even talking about his knee, which took a hard hit and is screaming about it now. He's not sure he can stand, and so he's not even going to try, even if it means that everyone is staring at him on his knees in the center of a fighting ring.

A sharp hiss distracts him, though, and Tony looks up to see that no one is looking at him. In fact, everyone's eyes are on Sif instead, as the sword in her hand changes from a blade to a snake. Tony watches, wide-eyed and confused, as a green-gold glimmer moves along the weapon, leaving behind deep black scales in it's wake. He instantly recognizes the distinctive color as that of Loki's magic, but Sif hardly seems bothered by the creature her weapon has turned into, even when it turns it's head and snaps at her. With a quirked eyebrow, the warrior only throws the magical construct away from her, and as the snake hits the dusty ground, it changes back into the training sword.

Tony keeps his eyes on Sif, worried for her reaction - Asgard has never taken kindly to Loki's pranks before - but while the crowd looks a bit uneasy and the Avengers are alarmed, Sif isn't bothered at all. In fact, she has a smile on her face that's half smirk and half genuine, huffing out a laugh before she steps forward, offering a hand to Tony. He laughs too, though without being certain of why and takes the help, letting Sif pull him to his feet with disturbing ease. She moves the both of them out and away from the ring without comment, still smiling somewhat knowingly. Steve and Bruce both start to approach them, but Tony waves them cheerfully away. "We're good! Just going to take a bit of a breather".

Neither man looks particularly convinced, but they both know better than to force help onto Tony, especially when it's not serious, so they back off. Sif gives him a questioning look, but Tony just gestures towards a bench that's out of immediate earshot from the crowd, and the best bit of privacy that the two will get. He's got some questions - not just about today - and it's better to ask them without an audience. Sif, despite the lack of an explanation, follows along, helping Tony along and dropping them both on the bench. Sif stays quiet, stretching out and waiting for Tony to speak.

Easing back onto the bench, Tony doesn't immediately do any talking, trusting that Sif will wait a short while for him to get his shit together. Instead, he takes stock of his injuries; they are mostly just bruises or scrapes, though the twinge in his wrist speaks to a serious sprain, and his knee feels like it's taken some serious damage. Still, it's nothing to really worry about, as some rest will heal up most everything and he's used to pain in his knee, so he focuses on just relaxing, slowing down his breathing and heart-rate until the pounding in his ears has diminished.

It's only then that he turns to the warrior sitting at his side, and Sif in turn looks to him. "You wished to speak with me?", she asks, and Tony responds with a nod. He isn't sure where to start, and he has quite a lot of questions about what has happened in Asgard since Loki's return, but it's probably easier to just ask about the snake, and Sif's unexpected reaction to the prank.

"So what's up with the little snake trick?"

"Just Loki expressing his displeasure with our match", Sif snorts, brushing away the prank as if she's used to it - and she might be, who knows. "He probably feels that I was too rough on you". Tony nods as if this makes sense - and in some twisted, Loki-ish way, it sort of does - but then a sudden realization has him sitting up to search the training yard. When he doesn't find anything, however, he slumps back down, not sure if he is disappointed or relieved. Knowingly, Sif smiles. "You won't spot him here. Our prodigious royal advisor has an image to maintain, and it wouldn't do for everyone to see him following around his favorite mortal".

Scrunching his nose at the teasing jab, Tony chooses not to respond. All of this with Loki is really
making him want to slam his own head in a door - or maybe slam a certain mischief god's head in the door. It's all so damned confusing, and yet Tony wants for things to turn out better between them. There are times, after all, when he almost feels like everything can work out, and it will all be okay in the end, but then he remembers the ache of loneliness he had suffered through for too long, at there is bitterness in him that just won't forget it. And after everything, he just doesn't know how to feel or think about Loki's 'guardian angel' response.

Sif seems to realize that her words were struck deeper than intended, and she offers Tony an out. "But I know this is not why you wished my company, Stark. Ask me what you will and I will give what answers I can".

Okay, that doesn't really lighten the mood at all, not with what Tony wants to speak about, but that isn't Sif's fault, and he appreciates the effort. "I want to know about the Chitauri's attack, and what happened with you, Loki and Queen Frigga". Freezing in place, Sif's expression is wary and guarded, but she isn't hostile, nor does she make an immediate retreat. Tony is quick to continue before she can turn the conversation to another topic. "I already know the basics from Frigga herself - that the Chitauri attacked for some good old revenge on Loki and that Frigga defended him because imprisonment left him weakened. Then she nearly died, but you were there and you let Loki free and fought with him and it all turned out good in the end".

"If you know all that", Sif presses cautiously, "than what is it you would seek to hear from me".

"I want to know why", Tony blurts out, but he clarifies when the warrior goddess only looks bemused. "I want to know what you were thinking when this all went down. I want to know what you saw - what you heard - that convinced you to let Loki out of that cage". He runs a hand through his hair in mild agitation, blabbering on in slight desperation. "I mean, I know you and he were kind of at each other's throats - what with the whole 'betraying Thor and murdering a bunch of people' thing - so it seems to me that you would be one of the last people to just bust him out of jail like that. I just don't get it and I want to know".

"Ah". There is understanding blossoming on Sif's face, but she turns away from Tony with a faint smile, staring up at the cloudless sky. "You wish to hear why I - who have long felt nothing but distaste for the Trickster Prince - would be the first in Asgard to forgive him. You want to hear of the changes that I saw", Sif's eyes flicker briefly over at Tony before she goes back to gazing forward, "and you wish to know if those changes are enough for you to forgive Loki as well".

Tony stops in place, words of protest already forming, but then he just chuckles humorlessly. Yeah, that's the truth, even if Tony couldn't admit it to himself. "You know", he says almost fondly, "Thor used to talk all the time about how similar you and Natasha were, but I could never really believe it". He laughs softly, but genuinely. "I'm starting to see it now, though".

"Only now?" The goddess's smirks, but there is real amusement in her eyes.

"You two are terrifying enough alone", the engineer shoots back. "The thought of both of you, together - the entire universe cowers in fear". That raises a laugh from Sif and Tony can't help but to join in. It's not much, nor does it distract from Tony's unanswered request, but it's nice enough before everything fades to silence again. Then Sif turns more serious - no, not serious, but solemn, and she's obviously not just looking up at the sky because it's a pretty shade of blue. She's somewhere far off in her own head and Tony knows the feeling, so he doesn't say a word.

"You are right", she starts, and this is an admission of some kind of sin - the guilt and shame of it flashes across Sif's fast quickly, but Tony sees it all the same. "I was the first to hate Loki before and
even now, I could not tell you for certain why. He never did anything to earn such ire from me, but I think it might have been merely because he and I were both so different from everyone else and I did not want that, in my youth. It seemed to me that the only way to be like all the warriors I so admired was to distance myself from the one man who did not live up to that ideal and so I pushed Loki away from me”. Sif shakes her head, but her smile isn't proud or happy at all. "I see now that it was a stupid and foolish move on my part and I can feel only shame for it. We could have been great allies, if not friends, but I was too proud to seek his aid and he was too stubborn to let my nature beat him down. It made enemies of us from early on”.

"It was only after Loki's return to Asgard as a prisoner that anything began to change. It was not immediate, but Thor had changed and as his friend, so did I. He questioned me on my actions during his banishment - he wanted to know why I so quickly turned on Loki, even though he was the next in line for the throne and my actions were those of a traitor to the crown”. Sif sighs, brushing at some hair that a breeze has blown in her face. "I had no good answer and Thor made it clear that while he felt my heart was in the right place, he could not place his trust in a warrior that so easily turned on her homeland just for that - I would be no good as a fighting asset for the Asgardian throne”. Huffing, Sif falls silent and Tony realizes that even now, Thor's words must still sting. Everything he knows about Asgard and everything he has heard about or from Sif, says that her ability as a warrior is one of the things she is most proud of and this is not something that she would be able to just let go. Tony can tell that she surely would have been hurt and even enraged, but it was something that she recognizes she needed to hear. "And I was given a unique opportunity when Frigga herself approached me, asking if I would stand as her own personal bodyguard. It is not an offer I would turn down normally, even though many find that such duties bring little in terms of glory from battle, but I justified my eagerness to do so as a furtherance of my duty. I reasoned that if there was any left in Asgard who Loki might seek to manipulate, it would be Frigga, who still loved Loki so dearly. I wished to protect her from his wiles”.

"Of course, that was not what I found at all”, she supplies, almost laughing at herself for this folly of belief. "While Loki kept to his silence and distrustful watching when others came to watch, he could not do so with Frigga. She was the only who ever chose to enter his cell and when she did, it was as if the trickster would go through an unwilling change. He couldn't help but to be like a boy in her presence, gratefully taking any love or kindness that Frigga dealt and often seeming tearful for it. It was odd to see, as this was Loki vulnerable and young in a way that I could only hazily recall from even my own earliest memories. And Loki hated me for what I saw, but I would not leave Frigga's side while she stayed in his prison and he would not turn away his mother's affections”.

"It took some time, but eventually we found a necessary peace. It was understood that neither of us would back down in this and so I would still accompany Frigga, but I would bring a book or task to pass the time with. It gave them both some semblance of privacy, but without me abandoning my duties and I think that the gesture might have been appreciated, though with Loki, it is difficult to tell. Then came the attack”. Sif's expression turned dark, dangerously filled with both anger and some deep-seated desire for blood. "The alarms sounded through Asgard and though I felt that I should stay with the Queen, she ordered me to the walls, hoping that I might help keep the invaders away. It was a useless move, however, as their numbers were just too overwhelming. All of our forces were quick to fall back to the throne room, thinking that the creatures were aiming for the Vault and it's multitude of treasures, but I did not follow. Some instinct told me that the creatures were aiming instead for the dungeons and I was correct, though I was the only who moved that way”.

Sif's hands were curled around the aged wood of the bench, clenched tightly enough that the solid
seat creaks. "It took me far too long to fight through the ranks of those mindless beasts and I took down nearly an entire horde on my own before I reached where I had last seen Frigga". There is an ominous crack from the bench, and Tony sincerely regrets that he has asked Sif to relive something that is so painful, but he can't stop her now. The goddess's voice cracks also and she seems to only be able to speak in a harsh growl just louder than a whisper. "The Queen had already fallen back until she was pressed to the cell's entrance, yet she still fought. Those bastard things tore at her and ripped and growled and bit, but she kept fighting them back, even as she was forced to lean heavily on the doorway she protected. It was only when she saw me that Frigga allowed her strength to fail, knowing that I would stand in her stead".

There is horror in that statement - a fear of what could have been, and the terror that Sif certainly had felt watching Frigga fall before her. Tony feels slightly panicked just thinking about it and some of Sif's pain is certainly reflected in his own eyes - mirror neurones and basic empathy at it's finest, sharing the hurt and bad feelings around. It's all too easy to see Frigga fighting until her last breath just for Loki - for her child - and that's just as terrifying as when Frigga had originally shared the story.

"Of course", Sif continues, "I immediately did so, protecting both my Queen and my Prince in equal measure, but I was not so lost in the fight that I did not notice Loki himself. He looked like a small boy again and he made no attempt to hide his pain or his fear from me. Had I the chance, I would have stumbled at the tears he spilled that day, but I could not spare a single moment for such a thing. Instead, I could only fight on as Loki pressed both hands to the barrier that separated him from Frigga and he screamed out to save her". The goddess has recovered some calm now, grip easing off the abused wood of the bench and she almost sighs as she speaks on. "I didn't even hesitate. All I needed to know at that moment was that Loki would fight to save the mother he loved and so I pressed a hand to the lock and willed it open, lowering the guards and the magic of his cell".

Then Sif barks out a humorless laugh at whatever she remembers, pain and awe all wrapped up in one harsh sound and Tony flinches slightly at it. After the softly spoken story, it's too loud - or at least, that's how it seems, but it isn't even enough to draw the attention of anyone on the training grounds, for which Tony is grateful. He's not really sure what they would see on his face if they did bother to look his way. But Sif's voice is a distraction from those thoughts and he's quickly lost in her tale again.

"Loki slaughtered the Chitauri in droves that even Thor would be hard pressed to match". It's not really a funny thing, but Sif laughs again anyway. "He filled the dungeon halls with their brackish and filthy blood and even as it dripped from him, he kneeled at Frigga's side and wept for her. Frigga was still conscious, but she was fading and I am no healer. Loki set about tending to her wounds with magic, but it was slow and careful work, with no guarantee of success at the end - in fact, I did not think he would prevail; this seemed merely to be the last efforts of a desperate man". Sif shakes her head, maybe at her own folly for believing the Queen lost to them. "Frigga, always loving him in her heart, was saddened to see her youngest son in tears, and tried to reassure him. She spoke of how she loved him and always would, even in death and that she had died the only death a mother could wish for, giving her life in defense of her child. When he attempted to protest, she merely shushed him and told him of how he was her courage in a dark place and that she did not fear the embrace of death, as it was coming for her and not her son".

There is a smile on Sif's face; it's a little bit sad and full of love for her Queen, which spreads a matching smile on Tony's own face. He can hear those words in Frigga's voice and while they make him want to cry just a bit, he can also hear the love in them. It's something that is just so wonderful about Frigga - her amazing capacity to love and even Tony has experienced it and no doubt that Sif has also. "I am unashamed to admit", Sif says, clasping a hand onto Tony's shoulder in some
comfort, "that I was crying from her words, but Loki refused to let his mother die and I am eternally grateful for that. I believe he saved her from sheer force of will more than any healing magic he might have known. When the attack was over, he and I both took the Queen to the healing wing and when others tried to interfere or send him back to the dungeons, I stopped them. It ended up that I stood guard at the door to her room, so that no one could remove Loki from her side".

"After this, as Asgard put itself together, it soon became Odin's decision of what should become of Loki and even I could not prevent him entrance to his wife's bed. I believe he and Loki probably spoke at great length in there, but of what, I couldn't say". Sif sighs, shaking herself out of the memories. "After Asgard was repaired and the Queen well again, another trial was held to once again discuss Loki's punishment. I testified in his favor for leniency, as did the Queen and Thor, but it was my words that held the most sway. My change of heart and mind over the second prince was enough to push for probation from the court and the King".

Tony nods as Sif's story lapses into silence. He couldn't care less about Odin or Asgard's legal proceedings, but that what Sif saw from Loki on that day was enough for her to release him without pause - that was the important part. It must have been truly something, as Tony had expected there to at least have been discussion on it, or promises that Sif extracted from Loki before releasing the door. But no, it still feels like there are entire pieces missing from the puzzle that Loki has become for him and this isn't nearly enough to solve it all. Tony isn't quite sure why he had expected Sif to have all the answers in the first place.

The dejection must show on his face - or Sif really is more like Natasha than he cares to think about - because a small smile pulls at the corner of her lips. "I know this might not be the most satisfying of tales, nor are all your questions answered, but it is not my place to tell you if Loki is worthy of your forgiveness. That is something only you can decide, Tony Stark, and maybe it would be a decision best made after speaking with him". Then Sif stands and leaves with only that advice for Tony to think about and he grumbles into his hands. Maybe it's the water up in Asgard, but why does it seem that everyone here wants he and Loki to get back together?

* * *

He knocks against the door, waiting in impatient silence for an answer. It's been two days since he has last paid a visit to Tony Stark, but the boy shuffles his feet nervously. He wants to be here and he wants to see the human inventor again, but the last time he had seen Tony, the man had been suffering through a breakdown. When the Queen had sent him away, he had not wanted to go, but now he worried that Tony would resent him for witnessing that moment of weakness. It makes anxiousness bloom in the pit of his chest, especially as the moment drags on and still no one answers the door.

He should leave - he really should, and he almost does, but he knows for a fact that Tony didn't come to the feast and the kitchen staff had said that no one brought the man any food either. So instead of doing as he should and walking away, he presses an ear to the door, listening for sounds from within, but there's nothing. That's a bit worrisome, as if Tony isn't here or at the feast, then he's probably lost. Or there is the library, the boy supposes, but he doesn't want to carry the tray full of food in his arms down to the library, only to have to search throughout its maze of rooms. Besides, his curiosity is insistent that there is something in the human's rooms worth investigating and he's never been very good at denying the urge to snoop a bit, especially not where Tony is concerned.

So the boy pushes open the door just enough to slip through and shuts it just as carefully behind him.
To his surprise, the room is fully lit as if someone is in, but no one has spoken up or come to investigate the noise of the door opening. He moves further into the room, inquisitive eyes searching over every surface for information about Tony and his current whereabouts until they land on a foot dangling over the armrest of the room's couch. Walking around it, he can't help but smile at Tony sprawled on his back along the piece of furniture, his right leg propped up on the armrest while the other dangles onto the floor. Tony is still wearing the sweaty and dirty clothes he had sparred in earlier and his cane is lying haphazardly on the floor, speaking to the fact that this was probably an unplanned nap that got out of hand.

The boy can't help it as a quiet laugh escapes him. Tony's hair is mussed and sticking up in multiple directions and his mouth is hanging open in a rather idiotic expression. It's endearing for all that it's ridiculous, so the boy sets the tray of food on the nearby table, leaving it covered, before returning to the mortal's side. He makes quick work of the man's shoes and props both of his feet up, then tucking a blanket over him, as the palace can get somewhat chilly in the night. Throughout this all, Tony doesn't even grumble or move about in his sleep, practically dead to the world.

When he is satisfied that Tony is as comfortable as he can be made on the couch, the boy runs a hand through the silvering hair of the genius. He is hesitant to do so, almost flinching away at first, but he smooths out the stray locks, stepping back with a soft smile. The man looks much less sloppy now, though there is still the silly expression on his face, but the boy only snickers again before turning elsewhere. Immediately, his eyes are drawn to the red-metal case not far from Tony's feet.

The boy steps closely up to it, kneeling in front of what he knows to be a set of the Iron Man armor. Carefully - delicately - and with heart pounding, he runs a finger over the lines of the armor, brushing over the seams where red and silver meet. The grooves are almost imperceptible to touch and he can't help but shiver a bit as he thinks of how this armor is almost a living entity unto itself, ready at any moment to unfold and come alive at the command of it's creator. It makes Tony seem that much more godlike, even with his mouth opened wide and near to falling off the furniture.

But then Tony shifts and the boy, fearing nothing more at the moment than being caught, flees the room with as much care and speed as he can muster.

Chapter End Notes

The artist would like a word with you:
"Oh, Loki. It's like he's living out his own personal romantic comedy where he's the guy who seems all super-cool and smooth but is a total sadsack loser when it comes to his personal life. Royal advisor, wielder of ancient and powerful magics, tall, pale, and handsome with ridiculous green eyes, and he still has to resort [SPOILER]. Why, Loki, whyyyyy?
Loki's romantic epic fail aside, Sif is such a badass."
One month passed rather quickly for Tony - a benefit of his lifestyle. Between fighting bad guys - though Loki never showed himself - helping Pepper run Stark Industries and boozing his way through just about every New York City bar, there wasn't much time left for waiting around. Still, sometimes when Tony actually went to bed voluntarily, he would feel the curl of anticipation in his gut, making him almost giddy as he would lie awake in bed. He couldn't help it, as he would finally be getting all the pieces to the puzzle of Loki's mind. Sure, he had heard some things from Thor, but there were huge gaps in the whole story and Tony wanted them filled.

Of course, the whole team was rather concerned about Tony's behavior. He wasn't actually behaving differently, but it seemed so odd that the engineer would just disappear right after a mission he wouldn't talk about to come back four days later seeming to be perfectly normal. The Avengers all agreed that something had happened during the fight with Loki, but the only one who could even begin to explain was the Hulk and Bruce's memory of time spent as the other guy was hazy at best. Steve and Natasha both seemed to think that Loki had somehow gotten leverage on Tony, but they were hesitant to call a teammate compromised, especially without any evidence of such. The others were less specific in their worry, but it all created a general cloud of tension that hung around the Tower and that Tony deftly ignored.

He didn't really care what the team thought and he had given them a reasonable explanation when questioned. He merely explained - using the most technical and inane jargon he could think of - that JARVIS had had a glitch during the fight, allowing Loki to escape while Tony was trapped in a malfunctioning Ironman suit. So, immediately after the fight ended, he packed up and headed out to Malibu, where the core of JARVIS's servers were housed, and then he proceeded to go through every last bit of the AI until he found the problem and fixed it. In the face of the team's skepticism, Tony even got JARVIS to back him up, with the AI detailing some of his data about the glitch - data that was all added in and falsified by Tony after deleting the Wet Cats files. It didn't convince everyone - mainly Tasha, who was always suspicious, and Bruce, who understood the tech enough to follow along with most of it - but it got the questions to stop and that was all Tony really cared about.

Then he told everyone that he was heading back out to Malibu for another weekend getaway and all the concerns came flooding back in. Tony was barraged with questions of his motivations and need, of why he would do that and what if something happened, or if they needed Iron Man to fight. And while Tony had thought up a half-baked excuse about company work or something, he decided to remind everyone that he was Tony Stark and he could do whatever the fuck he wanted. That didn't go very well at all, but by that point in the evening Tony's patience had been entirely burnt away and he wasn't feeling too bad about being snappish. It wasn't like he was going off the grid or anything and he could always fly back in when shit started, as it inevitably would.

Somehow, though, Tony managed to extract promises from all the Avengers that they would leave him alone for an entire seventy-two hours, excepting a major emergency. Even Pepper was sworn in on that, though only after interrogating Tony on why he wanted three days of isolation. She was almost easier to convince, though, as Pepper was used to Tony's odd mood swings, or how he sometimes got tired of playing the public figurehead of Stark Industries. All it really took was some promises by JARVIS that Tony would be fed and monitored for that time and then Pepper backed
off, for which Tony was very grateful. The wonderful thing about Pepper was that she knew when to step away and leave Tony to himself, which was a talent that his teammates hadn't mastered yet.

As fast as time passed over that one month, though, the full weight of it hit Tony on the day he flew out to his Malibu house. Sitting on the plane with only his own thoughts, the anticipation set in like a buzzing under his skin, and it took all of Tony's patience to keep from pacing the full length of the plane. In his desire to make sure everything ran smoothly, he had made all arrangements ahead of time - well, JARVIS made all the arrangements ahead of time, but still, they had been made, which left Tony with nothing to do on the flight. There was already going to be a driver waiting and the house was stocked with food and more alcohol than even Thor could drink, which should help the whole story-telling go smoothly. Assuming Loki showed up at all.

That was the fatal flaw in this plan - Tony had no way of making Loki show up and no guarantee that he would. Of course, there was Loki's insistence on this whole deal thing, but that wasn't exactly trustworthy, though the fact that Tony was still alive did say quite a lot. But still, it would be a very long and very shitty weekend if that son of a bitch mischief god didn't turn up. The worry plagued Tony throughout the flight and even still through the car ride and well into the house. But still, Tony forced himself into bed, convincing his overactive mind that getting sleep was the best way to pass the time until Loki's supposed arrival the next day. Besides, sleep would be good, right? If Loki had a lot to tell - and he surely did - then Tony didn't want to start nodding off at any point. That would surely piss Loki off and get Tony murdered without all his questions answered.

Sleep, by some miracle, came easily.

* * *

Loki didn't show up immediately the next day, nor had Tony expected him to so he took his time in the morning, showering and enjoying his first coffee of the day. Despite the anticipation, he somehow managed to even get some work done on a few things, mostly just looking over proposed research from some Stark Industries employees. It was well into the evening when Tony came back to himself, but with still no Loki, he decided to take stock of his personal bar, pulling out drinks that might make the night go easier. He settled on his favorite bourbon for himself, something that was warm and smooth when it slid down his throat and that he could handle without getting ridiculously drunk. For Loki he pulled out both absinthe and everclear, unsure whether the god would prefer something to taste or just a very potent drink. Even for all that, though, Loki still hadn't arrived and left to wait again, frustration and doubt started to creep in. Finally, as midnight was approaching, Loki showed.

The god's appearance this time was different. He took form at the end of the couch opposite from Tony and staring straight ahead. He was silent but not in a way meant to intimidate or prowl; instead, Loki seemed tired and heavy, quiet in a manner that was resigned to his fate and nearly haunted by it. A part of Tony felt vaguely guilty about that but he shoved it aside for curiosity. He did manage to hold his tongue by some miracle, giving Loki the mercy of time, and using that moment to study the god that sat before him.

Loki looked tired, older somehow, with lines tight around his eyes and his mouth pinched forcefully. Everything in the god's bearing was weary and his facade of calm indifference was nearly shattered, with fists pressed tight against his legs and his spine rigid. For all that, though, Loki wore no armor, only casual pants with an unfitted top and his hair was loose, not controlled by whatever slick the god normally used. His pale skin in the moonlight added something ethereal to the picture, like a
spirit given shape for a short time. There was a gentle curl to his hair and it gave an air of vulnerability to the god which seemed odd against the images Tony had of Loki, but in this setting, it was entirely natural. Because that's what Tony was asking for after all - he wanted every one of Loki's secrets and feeling and that level of exposure was a vulnerability in itself, let alone what weaknesses it could reveal.

The fragility of how Loki appeared, from both tension and exposure, made Tony keep quiet, because it seemed to him that talking would break apart the god sitting before him. He even feared to move, afraid it would disturb the stillness enough to shatter Loki and then how would he ever finish this?

"Before you can begin to comprehend", Loki's voice pierced the silence, though it sounded hollow and his words were dead in the air. Tony startled out of his own reverie, settling again to watch Loki's body as he listened. "You must be told of the worlds around you, the ones you cannot know. There is first Asgard and Vanafheim, the lands of the gods. Then next is Svartalfheim of the Dwarves and Alfheim of the Elves. The dead find home in Hel, which lies in Niflheim, and the fire spirits burn across Muspellsheim. This leaves only the home of the giants, the bogeymen of Yggdrasil, monsters of the Nine Realms - Jotunheim". Voice breaking on the word, Loki's lips were pressed tightly together, holding back whatever emotion he was struggling with, before finally spitting out. "That is the realm which spawned me".

Oh, well... Tony realized that maybe Loki's issues went even deeper than he could dream, if the use of the words 'monster' and 'spawn' were any hint. Even all the way back to when he was born, the shit was getting heavy, and wow, Tony really needed to get some alcohol into Loki if he was going to make it out intact. With that thought in mind, he silently reached forward, pouring out the absinthe into a glass he had pulled out earlier, then setting it before Loki, careful to keep his eyes on the god for any kind of sign that he was going to be attacked, but Loki didn't even seem to notice, sitting quietly and still staring straight out the windows at the sea.

It was only when Tony was leaning back in his seat again, holding a glass of bourbon in his fingers, that Loki started to speak once more. Tony listened intently, watching the broken facade of a once-proud god brought low by what was being revealed and he realized that maybe he had made a terrible mistake. This wasn't going to answer all his questions or put an end to his obsession with Loki - it was only the beginning of something much more twisted than mere curiosity could account for.

* * *

The story telling didn't end until late into the next night but Loki never stopped to sleep or to eat, so Tony didn't ask for a break either. The only time Tony interrupted at all was when the sun began to rise, and with it, the tension in the room. With a sharp wave and a near silent command, Tony had JARVIS black out the windows, locking them in darkness and keeping away the approaching day. Something eased out of Loki at that, as if the god was minutely grateful and Tony knew the feeling - some things were never meant to be seen or spoken of in the light of day, where the could be properly exposed and examined. Loki's story was one of those things, and after everything the god had already told him, it was the least Tony could do to preserve the veil of night.

It was hard, though, to sit and listen for so long - not from the actual stillness of it, but some of what Loki shared was so painful and disheartening, or even just cruel, that Tony wanted to protest on the god's behalf. It was hard, after all, to hear of Loki's pain as the myths of the vikings were proven true. Children being killed or stolen away, lovers lost, freedoms denied him, and his entire being
condemned and cast aside for being merely different. The more Loki spoke of, the more Tony felt for him, and it was a dangerous thing to have sympathy for the devil, he knew. But what had been before just vague parallels and the impression of similarities was giving way to definite understanding of the feeling behind Loki's behavior, an intimate knowledge that they were too much the same for Tony to ever really walk away from this. He would never be able to use what he learned here against the god, though Loki wouldn't trust that, but Tony knew it without a doubt; he was being given a painfully wrought gift of blood and weakness, and he could never abuse something so preciously held.

But the storytelling ended eventually, finishing on a downward slide of desperation, hatred and anguish, with dark tones of torture to push the madness in Loki along. Tony found himself shaking from it all, from the emotions that Loki tried to suppress but couldn't, and he could see that the god's hands were shaking too, even though Loki was trying to control the physical response. In the drowning silence that followed, Tony floundered, not sure how to respond or what to say next - he didn't know what would get him killed and what would let him live, but it was all just so much, too much at once, and this was really a terrible idea. He regretted it already.

So did Loki, it seemed, as the god's breathing was picking up sharply, turning shallow and distressed as the shaking worsened and sweat beaded along his brow. In some distant corner of Tony's mind, he realized it was a panic attack, nearly instinctively recognizing the symptoms from the few that Tony had experienced not long after the Chitauri attacks. Acting with little thought and no real plan, he moved deftly across the couch, placing a hand on top of Loki's, and the other curled along the back of Loki's neck. That snapped Loki from his mind-space, but the far off look in his eyes was replaced with instinctive terror at how close an enemy was and how Loki was in no way fit to escape even Tony's mortal grip.

Beginning to hyperventilate, Loki was truly trembling now, shakes rattling his whole body, jaw and all his muscles locked tightly up even as the god nearly choked on air. Tony stayed close, mumbled nonsense and babble falling from his lips as he tried to get the god to breathe, or focus, while quelling a sympathetic response in his own body. Panicking himself would do no one any good, so he concentrated on Loki instead.

"Breathe, Loki. In and out as slow as you can", the genius muttered, leaning into Loki's space as he did so. "Try and copy what I'm doing. It'll help - I promise you it will help". At this point, Loki was beyond disbelief or suspicion, taking comfort where it was given as he tried not to drown in his own mind. Tony was that comfort, providing an anchor for the god as the tremors began to fade, and his breathing normalized. All at once, it seemed as if Loki's strength gave out, his whole body falling forward against Tony and practically dead to the world. It was unexpected, jarring Tony unduly, and he nearly buckled under the sudden wait, but he did catch the god. And he held onto Loki's form, at first just to make certain that Loki hadn't died, but then to offer something back for what he had been given. Loki deserved that much after everything he had felt and said and done and Tony was more than willing to provide this small comfort for a while. So he laid down on the couch with Loki tucked tightly against him, silently watching the face of the exhausted god, and he waited for everything else to finally catch up with him. He had a lot of thinking to do, after all.

*I * *

"I want to tell you a story", Tony said. Loki stared at him in silence, the two still entwined on the couch. The god had just awoken, subtly going from the relaxed state of a dreamless sleep to the tension of waking to the unknown. He hadn't seemed fazed, however, by Tony's proximity, nor had he tried to move away. Instead, Loki had held still, like a doll in Tony's arms, and it was exactly
what the man needed at the moment. He and Loki were now reversed - Tony would speak and Loki would listen in silence, watching even as Tony stared away at nothing. Then, they would probably get drunk and do something irrevocably stupid to erase the feeling of confessions that lingered in the air. But first... "I want to tell you a story about an arrogant bastard who should never have reproduced, and how everyone loved him, and how it ruined his son's life because while it's like some big fucking joke to say 'Daddy never loved me', there's nothing more accurate than that. My dad never did love me and no one ever saw that or thought to question how I ended up just as fucked up as I am".

And throughout it all, Loki's hand stayed firmly curled around his own, in the solidarity of secrets spilled and pain shared.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guess what, the artist has more things to say to you:
"Whoa, that is one heavy first date. Goodness, couldn't they just go out for ice cream sundaes? I really liked how Loki's story started off, with him telling Tony about the worlds. Oh, Loki. Even though he's a bad guy and a total toolbag, he still makes you feel for him so much. If only he'd stop being a dick for like five consecutive minutes, everyone would probably give him a hug and take him home. Well, maybe they'd punch him first, a number of times, but then definitely hugs."
A week later finds Tony in the library, though he's by himself this time. He had actually gotten up early enough to make breakfast with everyone else, a first in the two weeks he's been on Asgard so far. It wasn't a big affair at all - and it was strangely reminiscent of eating in a cafeteria, with food laid out for people to grab before grouping up at long tables for some quiet morning conversation. It's pleasant enough, and Tony got to hear a bit more about Thor's time on Asgard, but it's not really worth getting up and ready so early. He bemoans the ungodly hour loudly throughout most of the meal, and more importantly, the lack of coffee. It earns him some good-natured ribbing about how the 'old man' needs his sleep.

Afterwards, though, it turned out everyone had their own plans. Bruce was going to show off some yoga moves to one of the hot Aesir ladies that had gotten handsy with him during the first feast - Tony didn't blame him for getting a little action, despite how Bruce protested that it wasn't like that. Clint and Natasha were going back down to the training grounds again; apparently Sif and Tasha had taken to tag-teaming all the other warriors, and now the Aesir had a healthy fear of women. Clint, however, was giving pointers to all the younger warriors still in training, helping with their archery and hand to hand combat.

That left Steve and Thor, but they were going off together to discuss military strategy with some of Asgard's war leaders - the realm wasn't at war currently, but it wasn't often that Midgardians got to visit, and everyone was hungry for their attention and information. Well, not for the information that Tony could provide, apparently. He was a tech genius, but few on Asgard would be interested in that beyond how it allowed him to fight, and even less would be able to understand the stream of technobabble. Actually, there was only one person on Asgard who could probably get it and Tony wasn't prepared to go searching out his company. Plus Dagan was nowhere to be found, so he was all on his own.

Silently grateful for that, Tony had headed back to the library, getting the attendant to bring him any books on portals or energy sources such as the Tesseract. There are few more books on this subject than on the Bifrost, and he feels a bit more confident about making progress as he takes the stack of books, balancing them carefully in one arm, and searches for some place to study. As he wanders from room to room, he notices that the library is mostly empty, but he doesn't just stop at the first open seat he finds. He feels compelled to keep moving deeper in, until his eye catches a doorway almost entirely hidden behind two bookshelves. It leads to a small windowless room with only a small table and two chairs in it, a magical light flickering in a wall holder.

Not having seen anyone around for a good minute or so, Tony takes the seat with a sigh, spreading the assortment of books out in front of him. The quiet room isn't nearly as comfortable a workspace as his lab, and Tony definitely misses JARVIS and his bots, but it is isolated, and that's a definite bonus. He's about to science, and he really doesn't want to be disturbed just for silly things like food or a break. After all, he's starting to feel a bit homesick without his gadgets, and this kind of rigorous studying is just what he needs to get his head back on right. And after getting everything organized and arranged to his satisfaction - which means not at all for Tony Stark - he does just that, diving into archaic texts on seeded structures, fractal energies, and warping the fabric of space to bridge impossible distances.
It's only as Tony is trying to decipher a passage that he thinks is about Euclidian wormholes that he is finally distracted. He's starting to feel a headache coming on, as the Aesir scholars who were writing all this drivel seem incapable of speaking in anything other than archaic poetic verses - he's only partially figured out what the hell they mean by a frozen star, and he wishes that there was some kind of translation guide he could use for whatever the fuck language these old asshats are speaking. Then the quiet scrape of a chair moving pulls him out of the internal monologue and Tony's head snaps up, startled by the sound. It would normally be odd for something so little to break his concentration, but he's used to blaring rock music that fills the air, not the stillness of the library, where even a little sound rings out like an explosion.

It's Loki who is now taking the seat in front of him and even before his mind has really had a chance to process that, he's sitting up straight, stiff in his seat when before he had been slumped over the books in front of him. Loki pretends not to notice - there's no way the god could actually miss such a violent movement - keeping his eyes lowered as he sits instead. Staring hard at the Trickster, Tony debates his next move. It would be well within his right to just get up and leave, but this is his space - he already claimed it - and he actually had been making some progress, even if it was slow goings. He could demand that Loki leave, then, but chances were that he would only succeed in raising hell and that in the end Loki would still be sitting there with his hands in his lap and eyes down. So he settles for waiting it out instead, glaring at Loki until the god finally looks up, expression somewhere between sad and apologetic - Tony doesn't really buy into that at all.

"My apologies for intruding", Loki begins, and it should be impossible how his voice can still be so enticing after all the lies Tony has heard him speak, "but I had hoped to catch you alone. I wish to speak with you for just a moment". Not willing to relent, and definitely not wanting to chat with Loki, Tony doesn't say a word. He's trying to convey how unwelcome this interruption is without actually speaking, because he doesn't trust himself should he open his mouth. Loki's eyes widen slightly, and his brow furrows, giving Tony a sad faced plea that is somehow even more piteous than Thor's puppy-dog eyes. "Please", Loki pleads, voice quiet, and Tony sighs in response.

"Just get it over with", he spits out, but it's less harsh than it could be and certainly not as biting as he had been at the feast. It's probably because everyone's been wearing him down slowly about how Loki has changed - Thor, Frigga and Sif all adamantly believe that and their conviction has Tony just a little bit convinced. Besides, contrary to what his teammates might think, he doesn't actually enjoy being an asshole all the time.

Loki looks relieved for a moment before something like nervousness sets in - but it can't actually be that because this is Loki, and he doesn't have to deal with something so plebeian as nerves. His eyes fall to his lap again, but his voice is steady, if quiet. "I wish to make amends for how I have behaved towards you, both at the feast and before. I understand that it is not so simple as expressing my guilt and asking for forgiveness from you, but I would like to try earn it from you, if I may".

Tony blinks, just short of having his jaw drop open in shock. This isn't really what he was expecting, because Loki pretty much never even feels sorry, and he certainly never apologizes or begs for forgiveness. He isn't supposed to care about how people perceive his actions, or if they forgive him his misdeeds, and he isn't supposed to ask that of Tony. It's almost unfair how off his game this has left Tony feeling, but there's a niggling suspicion in the back of his mind that Loki is just being contrite so he can get Tony back into his bed. It isn't helped by the fact that Loki didn't look up once during his little speech, and that's a tell even if nothing else suggests a lie. Loki's eyes always reveal what he's thinking, after all, especially if you know what to look for. And Tony knows exactly what to look for when trying to gauge his sincerity of Loki Silvertongue.

"Say that again", Tony demands. But when Loki starts to speak, his head is still down, and Tony's
eyes narrow. He cut's the god off. "Look at me and tell me what you want, Loki".

The trickster's head snaps up, immediately complying - or maybe he's shocked into it by the strength of Tony's voice. Loki is still wide-eyed, but there is no mistaking the desperation that pulls the corners of his mouth down or lines his forehead. There's even some regret, maybe - that's one thing that Tony could never quite read from Loki, and he still sometimes thinks that regret is a sentiment Loki is incapable of feeling. But there is definitely wet sheen to his eyes, Tony can see it clearly, and it makes the green of his eyes waver and change in the steady glow of the magic light. "Please", Loki repeats, and that has got to be the most the god has ever used that word in one day. "Please just let me try - I only wish to share your company and talk occasionally while you are here".

"I'm pretty positive you want more than just that", Tony counters, "or was I mistaken about your intentions at that feast". Tony wasn't mistaken and they both know it.

"I thought it the best way to approach you based upon our... history". That way of describing their mutual past seems to displease the god, if how it just sort of falls from his mouth is any hint. Tony can't help but agree - the word makes it all sound so dry and easily buried - but now isn't exactly the time to discuss semantics. "I know now that it was a mistake", Loki continues, "but while I would like to have you as I did before, I am content with anything you might give me".

Humming, distracted in thought, Tony doesn't answer. It's frustrating how he can want to just forgive Loki, but it's not so easy as that. Somehow, there's even less trust between them now than when they were enemies and Tony isn't sure if there is any foundation left to rebuild something amongst the feelings of bitterness and abandonment. It's hard to say if Tony can even agree to a sort of truce - he keeps expecting the axe to drop at any moment, that this will just be a further abuse of his feelings for the god, and how the hell can they ever salvage any relationship like that. But still he wants, and the burning in his chest feels so much like what he and Loki had before that he brings a hand up to rub absently at his arc reactor, frowning against the swell of tangled up emotions.

It's a fit of recklessness that drives him to shoving the book at Loki, but what has Tony's life been if not a constant stream of one reckless act after another and sometimes multiple ones at once. But he doesn't let himself think twice about what he's doing as Loki stares in confusion across the table. "So, I heard you're the one who can explain this to me".

Loki blinks once, then again before something eases in his face, relief pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Of course", he says, turning the book to face him. But his eyes don't leave Tony's face when he speaks and there's a spark there that makes Tony want to smile just a little. "It would be my pleasure".

* * *

It's already after lunch when Loki finally leaves Tony alone in the library, claiming to have duties he has to attend to. Tony waits for a short while, reciting the first two hundred lines of JARVIS's code in his head before moving quickly out of the room, only just remembering to pick up the books and notes scattered on top of the table. He moves as quickly as he can with his arms full of paper, cane tucked in the crook of his elbow so he's walking with a bit of a limp, but he doesn't have the free hand to use it. He heads straight out, taking the books with him back to his room, where he dumps
everything on the bed and then darts out. Using the cane, he's significantly faster, but it still takes longer than he likes to get to Bruce's room and his mind is chasing itself in circles the whole time.

Sitting in the library, Tony had recognized the significance of what he was agreeing to with Loki, but it had felt subdued - either muted by the atmosphere or by Loki's very presence. Now, though, he feels a bit of panic coming on because WHAT THE HELL IS HE DOING? This was not what he had planned and he's not supposed to want Loki anymore and he's certainly not supposed to hang out with the god like this. He needs some advice, and by the time he gets to Bruce's room, he's ready to Hulk out from the stress and beat down the door himself.

Instead, he knocks because Bruce could very well be getting laid right now and the dude really needs it. In fact, Tony's almost disappointed when Bruce opens the door and he's looking well put together - completely lacking in all the 'just got laid' signs - and there's no goddess to be found in the room. Tony doesn't wait for Bruce to say anything, strolling into the room and taking stock like it's his job. "So how was it?" He let's the leading question hang, turning back to Bruce so the man can see the suggestive smile on his face.

Bruce, being far too used to this behavior, however, just shakes his head. "I just explained some yoga moves to her and how the exercise can be calming".

"Yoga", Tony hums, slumping down onto the couch in Bruce's room, which is nearly identical to Tony's own, if much neater. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

The other man pulls up a chair. "We aren't calling it anything at all, Tony, because we aren't getting any".

"Hey!", the genius protests, "I'll have you know that I could get anyone I wanted".

"I don't doubt your sexual prowess", Bruce says placatingly. "But I do have to question what - or who - it is that you want, exactly".

Tony sighs, bringing a hand up to rub at his eyes. It's just like Bruce to skip right through all the teasing and go for the heavy stuff, but Tony did come here for a good reason and Bruce is the one he trusts most out of everyone. Not that he doesn't trust the rest of his team, it's just that Bruce can think like him, but without the inherent childishness or arrogant mask. It's good for him, Tony thinks, to have someone he can open up to without worrying about what they will think. Bruce has never condemned him and he can't imagine the scientist would start doing it now. "I don't know, Bruce", Tony finally admits. "I thought I knew what I wanted, and that everything was sorted, but this isn't at all what I had expected".

"And what were you expecting?", Bruce asks, watching Tony's agitated fidgeting on the couch.

"I don't know that either! Just that it wasn't this!", he exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. "He was practically begging me to forgive him today, and what am I supposed to do with that?"

Bruce doesn't seemed nearly as shocked by Loki's apology as Tony had been. "What did you do?"

"I asked him about wormholes and how they work with magic", Tony sighs.

"So you're giving him a shot". Oh, Bruce does know him so very well.

The genius shrugs, staring at the ceiling. His voice is soft and uncharacteristically hesitant. "I'm
"giving him a shot". He turns to look at Bruce, head still resting back against the couch. "Do you think I should?"

"I think", Bruce starts, drawing out the words, "that if you want to find some peace, then you need at least talk with him some. He's the only one who can answer all your questions, after all".

"But why do I even still want him, after everything that's happened?" Tony growls, aggravated with himself. "I thought I had gotten over this - that I was better!"

"Tony, you can't beat yourself up over that". Bruce's frown is more pronounced now, starting to realize the full extent of the problem. "You are allowed to still want him - still care about him. It's not like you're broken or ill and still loving Loki doesn't mean that you need to be fixed. You can have feelings for him".

"But-" Tony starts. Bruce doesn't let him get more than that word out before speaking out, just a little bit louder to get the point across.

"No. We both know what you're thinking about right now, and I know that you think you should feel guilty about all this, but that's not true. You are allowed to love him, Tony", Bruce insists, leaning forward and earnest. "You aren't hurting anyone by that and you aren't breaking any promises for that".

"I just..., but Tony's voice trails off, not entirely sure he can explain how he feels about all of this. "I'm happy how I am, so why all this? Why do I feel like everything would be better with him there?"

Shrugging, Bruce shifts in the seat. "I don't doubt that you're happy now, but you can be happy with Loki too. They are just two different ways of living and only you can really decide which is better for you".

Tony leans forward again, resting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. He takes a long shuddering breath, voice slightly muffled as he speak. "Just- Just tell me that this isn't some kind of betrayal - that V wouldn't..." He waves a hand, trying to convey what he's asking without actually saying it.

"Tony", Bruce begins, shaking his head with a smile that's fond and sad, but then the door bangs open, startling both men. Clint comes flying in, vaulting over the back of the couch to sprawl next to Tony as the door slams back shut. It's not an entirely welcome interruption, shattering the fragile nature of this conversation and leaving Tony disgruntled. Clint has always had the worst timing of the whole team, and while they all loved the man like a part of the family, he definitely fit the role of the annoying younger brother that you want to beat and protect in equal measure.

"Your son's looking for you, Tony", the archer states, kicking his legs up onto Tony's lap. With an annoyed huff, Tony shoves them away, grumbling when he realizes that Clint is still covered in dust from the training ring, and now Tony's jeans are all dirty. He brushes them off rather aggressively, shooting dirty looks at the archer, who only smiles cheekily back. It's about then that Clint's words catch up with Tony's thoughts, and he stops for a long moment, trying to puzzle that out.

"Your son's looking for you, Tony", the archer states, kicking his legs up onto Tony's lap. With an annoyed huff, Tony shoves them away, grumbling when he realizes that Clint is still covered in dust from the training ring, and now Tony's jeans are all dirty. He brushes them off rather aggressively, shooting dirty looks at the archer, who only smiles cheekily back. It's about then that Clint's words catch up with Tony's thoughts, and he stops for a long moment, trying to puzzle that out.

"My son?" he questions, wondering who the hell Clint had gifted that nickname to.

"The Dagan kid", Clint says, spelling it out like it should be obvious. "He is so your lovechild".
"What?" is Tony's shocked reply, disbelief and confusion battling it out on his face. Bruce looks a little lost too, so Clint tries to explain.

"I just saw him looking for you - he looked pretty beat up that you weren't in your room or the library - and he looks almost exactly like Loki. Acts like him too, with what with the whole 'loner' thing he has going on", the archer exclaims. "But it's you that has the kid tripping over himself, so I bet he's the secret love-baby that Loki's been hiding away from you, and now the kid is so desperate to bond with his other daddy that he's playing page boy!"

Finally catching up with the archer's thoughts, Tony scoffs at the idea, shaking his head. "No way in hell, Clint! Did you forget Loki and I are both male?"

"Haven't you ever looked at all those old myths, Stark? Loki's popped kids out before".

"Those are myths, Clint. They aren't fucking true!" Tony growls back, eyes narrowed at all this ridiculousness. But he knows that they aren't just myths - he knows exactly how true they are and he really doesn't like to think about it because he knows what happens to all of Loki's children. That Loki would have another one after everything, and that he would have Tony's child, is something he can't bear to contemplate.

"How would you know? Maybe they are and Loki just won't admit it". Clint really isn't letting his theory die, which says something about how serious he is. The archer wouldn't press the issue unless he believed there to be some truth to the matter.

"Then how do you explain that Dagan's way too young! He can't be older than fifteen, which was well after Loki ditched me!" Tony points out, getting really sick of this. He doesn't want Dagan to be his kid because that meant that his own son had grown up all this time, and Tony had been there for a second of it.

"Actually", Bruce breaks in as the other men's tempers flare. "I think Clint could have a valid point". Tony tries to speak up but Bruce waves him down and continues speaking. "If Dagan is your kid, he would be half-immortal, so there is a very good chance that he would age slower than what we're used to. And Loki has magic, so it's entirely possible that he could change his shape or something similar. It could also explain why Loki left in the first place".

That get's Tony to shut up and really think, which was probably Bruce's intention all along, as the doctor is aware of how desperately Tony still looks for some answer. Clint seems to know to hold his tongue too, letting Bruce make his argument. "What if Loki didn't mean to get pregnant, an accident or something? Well, that can be a very stressful thing for someone, and maybe returning to Asgard was the easiest thing to do for him. It was his home for a long time, after all, and maybe he was counting on Frigga's support through the pregnancy. Plus, he couldn't have known how you would react to the news, Tony, and then after the kid was born, he was too scared to come back. I mean, it would be one thing for him to show up after a couple years of radio silence, but how much worse would it be if he had a toddler in tow too?"

Tony doesn't point out that Asgard is the last place Loki would ever take his child, because there are some things he still hasn't shared with the team, and which he never will. But it's terrifying as this all could be true. If Loki had really felt threatened, especially with the Chitauri after him, he would definitely have turned to Frigga - even back then it was obvious how Loki still loved and trusted her. Frigga obviously had feelings for Dagan in some capacity, something maternal, so her being the kid's grandmother wouldn't be all that surprising. And then there is Loki's behavior. If Loki had showed up after a few years with a toddler in his arms that he said belonged to Tony, well... even Tony can't
say for certain how he would have reacted, but there would have probably been alcohol poisoning
involved somewhere along the line.

Bruce, seeing how much this is all getting to his friend, starts up some conversation on a more light-
hearted topic, getting Clint to chat about what he's been teaching the Aesir. Tony feels distantly
grateful for that, but he isn't in the mood to talk with the archer at the moment - there's too much
going on and he still hasn't really gotten a satisfactory answer. He stands, leaving with a distracted
good-bye, and heads towards the training grounds himself. It's time to put Tasha's scary Russian spy
skills to use.

* * *

Natasha's leaning against one of the low walls around the sparring ring, watching two groups of
Aesir go at each other. She looks bored and disinterested, but Tony knows better than to believe that.
The spy is probably analyzing the fights going on in front of her, cataloguing details about each
warrior and how their skills could be counteracted. It's something Natasha does almost
subconsciously, Tony has learned, and while it's a useful ability, he sometimes wonders if she gets
tired of it. But it's one of the things that makes Natasha terrifying, so she probably enjoys it.

Tony steps up to stand next to the spy, noticing that there are significantly less people around than
the last time he visited the fighting ring. The atmosphere is much more subdued, also, and Tony
guesses that this is how the training field normally is when there aren't special guests to beat up.
Natasha doesn't say a word as Tony joins her in leaning on the fence, though he has his back turned
to the fighting, instead looking out over the other areas where warriors are working on archery or
practicing fighting moves on mannequins. He doesn't see Sif at all in any of the groups, and he
wonders if she's left town on a quest or something - that's what medieval warriors do, after all. Or
maybe some of the braver men have made a rule that Natasha and Sif aren't allowed on the training
pitch at the same time, probably in an effort to preserve what little dignity they had after the two
women finished with them all.

"So I see Clint has shared his little pet theory with you", Natasha states suddenly, startling Tony. The
spy glances sideways at him before returning her attention to the fight, though she keeps speaking to
him. "Dagan was down here earlier trying to find you". Briefly, Tony wonders if maybe he should
be trying to find the kid, as Dagan's never really sought him out like this before. But Tony's got some
important shit to try and sort out first; he can find the kid later.

"And what do you think of it?" he questions. When it comes to observing people, there's no one that
Tony has more faith in than Natasha. If something's going down or Loki is hiding a kid from him, it's
going to be Natasha who figures it out. Clint's good too, but he tends to rely more on instinct where
Natasha looks for proof.

In the corner of Tony's vision, he sees Tasha shrug. "It's not impossible, or even improbable, but you
should get some real evidence before you act on it".

"Yeah, probably", he dismisses. Even if he had some evidence, he still wouldn't know what the hell
to do with it. "Hey, what do you think they do for paternity tests up here?"

That earns a smirk from the spy, which is a tremendous accomplishment. "Something tells me you
probably shouldn't ask", Natasha shoots back. "They might start wondering why you need one".
"I think I'll spare myself all the awkward questions, then".

"Good plan".

They both lapse into comfortable silence after that. His earlier urgency to figure out what to do with Loki has been relieved, as if Natasha's very presence has put things back into perspective. And if the woman is half as psychic as she seems to be on most days, that was probably her plan all along. Now, though, he's unsure how to bring up the whole thing, but he really wants Natasha to tell him he's being stupid and then tell him how to fix everything.

Natasha, as always, though, knows exactly what he's thinking about. "You and Loki spoke this morning", she says. From anyone else, it would be a question, but Natasha already knows, and she's just pointing it out. Still, Tony nods as if in answer.

"Got any thoughts on that?", he asks, hoping that Tasha knows exactly how to handle this so he can stop feeling so uncertain and confused. But nothing is immediately forthcoming from the spy and the silence stretches on so long Tony begins to worry that he won't get an answer at all.

"There's something I believe I should tell you, Stark", Natasha says suddenly and out of nowhere, interrupting Tony's swirling thoughts, but she waits until Tony's focused back on her before continuing. "I know the details of Loki's departure from Earth".

Tony's full attention comes immediately to bear on the assassin, tension forming in his spine so quickly one could almost hear the snap. "What?", he hisses loudly, teeth grinding in his clenched jaw. How does Natasha know, and why doesn't he? Does the whole team know? Have they known all along and were just hiding it? Or did Loki for some reason confide in the spy at some point during their stay in Asgard?"

But even as the man works up to ask the barrage of questions, bubbling with anger and a demand to know, Natasha cuts him off. "Loki cut a deal with SHIELD and with Asgard behind your back. We were in on it - all the Avengers except for you".

"And why the fuck would he cut a deal with his enemies to get arrested?" Tony spits in disbelief, only growing angrier at what he's hearing. "What could be worth the price to his freedom or his pride?"

"You", is the deadpan answer, Natasha's unsettling gaze turned full-force on Tony. "He cut a deal to keep Fury from arresting you". The revelation brings Tony up short and his brain screeches to an abrupt halt, but then he bites out a pained laugh.

"I could handle Fury and Loki knew that", the man declares. "Loki wouldn't have done shit for me - not over Fury, at least".

"You couldn't handle the team, though", Natasha states and that shuts Tony right up. She sighs, looking at him before turning away. "You were the definition of compromised, Stark and we had no reason to believe that Loki had any plans to reform. If Fury gave the order, at least Clint and I would have followed. Steve too, probably, though he would make sure it was as painless an arrest as possible. Maybe even Thor would have pitched in, and with all that, Bruce would be unnecessary. And that's if you even really fought us at all, which I don't think you would have".

"Tasha", Tony cuts in, but the spy just keeps speaking, sounding annoyed that Tony still doesn't
"You would have lost your suits and your tech; you would have lost your company. You would have lost your teammates - your friends. Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, JARVIS... All gone. Fury would have locked you in a room buried miles underground, only coming to speak with you when he got bored and completely isolating you from anything technological or human or interesting. You would have been insane in almost no time and we both know it", the words hang in the air, but Natasha's voice is softer when she glances back at Tony. "More importantly, Fury and Loki knew it".

The information is slow to process in Tony's head, and he lets it swirl there for a long moment, not bothering to hide the emotions on his face from Natasha. She'll still read them anyway and she does always seem to know what to say, though whether it's sincere or not is often a guessing game. "Why didn't you tell me before? Any if you could have said something when there was still time for it to matter". The accusation comes out flat and dull to Tony's ears. He's lost the desire to be angry about anything Natasha's told him; he just feels confused and empty. It's like one big universal joke or something - if it is, than the universe is a sick bastard.

"Because we cut a deal with Fury too", is her reply, and then a she chuckles softly in morbid humor, eyes hooded. "You know how Fury is - no loose ends. He planned all along to have you arrested after he got the word that Loki was locked up safely in Asgard, but Loki was too desperate to see that. Clint and I caught wind of it, and so the team stepped in and talked him down. None of us wanted your blood on our hands, and neither did Fury want to make an enemy out of the Avengers. So another deal was made, and we payed for that with our silence". Tony's questioning look is enough of a demand for further explanation. "Fury seemed to think that if you knew exactly what Loki would do for you, it would drive you to follow after him, or something equally desperate. So if we wanted to keep you on the team and away from SHIELD's darker dungeons, then we couldn't speak a word of the backhanded dealings".

"But Loki could have", Tony points out. "He visited the night before we shipped him back here. He could have said something to me then".

Natasha snorts in derision, obviously not impressed with the argument. "Loki had already just exposed a dangerous weakness to his most powerful enemies. There was no way he was going to flaunt it in front of you, too".

Nodding silently, Tony sighs. He can't disregard the truth in that. "Guarded, secretive bastard", he mutters. Tasha chuckles before stepping away from the fence and turning fully towards Tony.

"For what it's worth", she says, looking slightly more genuine than normally, "I'm sorry we didn't say anything to you. Steve, Thor and Bruce regretted all the secrecy right from the beginning, and even Clint wanted to tell you after a while. By the time it seemed safe to admit anything, though, it was already too late". She sighs, flicking a lock of hair away from her face before folding her arms across her chest. "Don't be mistaken, I have no regrets and I wouldn't change my actions if I could - I did what I had to. But I am sorry that this has caused you undue pain, and I would have spared you it, if I could"

Tony smiles fondly, nodding. That is definitely a Natasha apology, and it makes him chuckle a bit. He just has one last question, though. "Why tell me now, then?"

"Because", the spy drawls slowly, "if Loki happened to come back down to Earth now, Fury wouldn't touch him". At Tony's look of confusion, she explains. "The agreement was that Loki's punishment would be handled by the Aesir, and it has. Fury can't go back on that without pissing off
the Thunder god about to become King. Besides, while no one has necessarily forgiven Loki, we've had bigger and more serious villains to work against, and Loki's invasion doesn't look so bad anymore”. Looking sideways at Tony, Natasha huffs fondly. "What I'm saying is that if Loki wanted to come back down to Earth, he could probably get Thor to name him an ambassador from Asgard, and Fury couldn't do anything about it. He might actually be a bit relieved if you got Loki to help us out in battle too. Then you two would be free to make doe eyes at each other all you want".

Tony shoots a half-hearted glare at Natasha, grumbling about her choice of words, but not really all that bothered. Instead, he focuses on what the assassin has implied. "So you think I'll be asking Loki to come live with me?"

"I think it's a possibility", she replies. "And if you did, no one on the team would question you. It's apparent that Loki has changed quite a bit and if it's him you want, then go after that. After everything you've given up, you deserve a little love in your life".

Sighing, Tony doesn't tell Tasha how he isn't sure what he wants, but he's positive that the spy already knows that. "I thought love was for children", he says to tease instead, deciding that he's done with all these serious conversations for today. He's making no progress, and the talks are more stressful than anything else.

"It is", she responds, letting the change of topic slide, but there's an amused smirk lurking at the corners of her eyes that she doesn't bother to hide from him. "But no one has ever thought you to be anything but an overgrown child, Stark". That makes Tony laugh and he smiles brightly at her, not bothering to fight against what everyone knows to be true about him. He does stick his tongue out at Natasha when she turns away, though, and he chuckles again when she still cuffs him on the arm, just hard enough to sting. Then a voice calls out from across the training pitch and they both turn to see Dagan moving their way. Natasha is eyeing the kid, who looks a little intimidated at the attention, but she doesn't say anything. And somehow, Tony ends up heading back to his room with Dagan, not quite able to shake the idea that maybe this is some sort of weird, one-sided father and son bonding.

* * *

The afternoon flies by in Dagan's company, sharing amusing anecdotes about his time as an Avenger and showing off the armor for Dagan. He doesn't actually put the suit on, knowing that standing in the familiar comforts of his own tech, with the familiar HUD booting up and JARVIS's voice in his ear, would provoke an emotional response he doesn't want to deal with at the moment. Instead, he has the armor assemble to stand on it's own. Each suit has been upgraded to include their own isolated versions of JARVIS, so that they can operate even when out of range of Earth, and Tony takes great pleasure in introducing the AI to Dagan. The two get along almost immediately and Dagan's face lights up when JARVIS offers to share his own records of Avengers' fights. With the suit blinking to life, JARVIS uses its built in projectors to display video footage of different fights against the wall and Tony can't help but chuckle to himself as Dagan watches them all with serious intensity.

They are both startled when there's a knock on the door. Tony gets it, pushing open the heavy wood door to reveal Steve and Bruce. Almost immediately, Dagan is scurrying off with a rushed apology, saying that he has to help the Queen ready for the feast. That leaves Tony with his teammates and
nothing better to do, so he has JARVIS lock the armor back down and heads out with the two other men. They don't head straight for the grand hall, though, as they have a bit of time to spare, and Steve wants to see if there are any collections of art available in the library. For the second time that day, Tony finds himself surrounded by the odd assortment of books, waiting somewhat impatiently as the attendant searches for the ones Steve has requested. There turns out to be quite a lot of them and they all have their arms loaded up as they turn towards Steve's room to drop them off. Afterwards they head to the feast, meeting up with the rest of the team along the way.

By now, all the feasting was starting to feel pretty routine. There was food then mingling intermixed with rowdy dancing and general bawdiness. Sometimes - normally at the request of the Queen - slower music would play, and then the Queen would take to the floor with Odin or one of her sons, and on one memorable night, a blushing Steve. Other couples would join in after the first turn around the room, but once that song finished, everything would return to being loud and wild until everyone was too tired to keep up the crazy behavior. Despite the many opportunities, however, Tony had yet to do any dancing himself; it was a waste of all that time Howard Stark had forced dance lessons on him for the sake of appearances.

This night's feast is no exception; the food is just as good as it always is and while he really does enjoy listening to the stories that are being exchanged, he wonders how the Aesir can have feasts like this all the time without getting bored. But then again, he wonders how the Aesir can live at all without getting bored - they don't really change all that often, and when they do, it's very slowly. Loki's the only exception, but then, Loki isn't even truly Aesir, though he still identifies as such before the court. Tony knows that he's one of the few people privileged enough to know of the god's heritage.

Still, after everything that has happened today, the feast is a good distraction. He is sitting in what has become 'his spot', sprawled happily between Frigga and Bruce. Natasha is across from him again, but when Steve goes to sit next to her, he's neatly shoved aside. Instead, Loki sits down in the seat, looking for all the world like he belongs there. Tasha doesn't seem too bothered, only glancing side-long at the god before smirking. Steve looks like he's going to protest, but Bruce gives him a look, and so Steve just sighs, shaking his head as he grabs the next seat down. Now, Frigga is sitting directly across from her son, and she rewards Loki with a bright smile, who smiles back, just as happy but smaller, softer somehow.

Tony doesn't even realize that he's staring - or that he's smiling a bit too - until Clint clears his throat, waggling his eyebrows at the genius when Tony turns to look. It's more than a little obnoxious, and it's definitely confounding, as he can't remember his team ever being so tolerant of Loki. It makes him suspicious - something else is going on here, and he'll definitely be investigating - but then the food is being brought out, and Tony settles for just ignoring his team and all their weirdness.

Conversation flows easily throughout the meal; Loki's presence doesn't do anything to deter anyone from sharing their stories and he even contributes a few, though it is a bit awkward at first. The whole thing plays out like some surreal family dinner, where the team is his family and they are all having dinner with his new boyfriend. As soon as Tony thinks that, though, he chokes on his drink - the team might be like a family but he and Loki are just barely speaking now. It's just that they worked on science all morning and that means something to Tony - Bruce was right, he is willing to give the god a shot at friendship, even if it's only so that Loki keeps helping him with wormhole theories.

Actually, everything is playing out to be very odd. It almost feels as if he and Loki are working towards actually dating properly. They had sort of been thrust upon each other before, pulled together by danger and addiction and an edge of violence. But now, all of this cautious manoeuvring
and hesitant conversation is like awkward flirting before the first date. He doesn't know why he's doing it either, but it might be that he's sort of forgiven Loki for leaving him in the first place, though the god should have at least told him. And then all of this theorizing on Dagan - the thought that maybe he and Loki have a son together - makes Tony want to fix this all. Not that it's his fault, but he can't help but want to give his (possible) child a real family and all the love that Tony never got from his own father. He doesn't want to be responsible for their being another fucked up Stark in this universe.

Tony sighs then realizes he hasn't been paying a bit of attention to what has been happening around him, and now everyone's finished eating and moving out to dance. Things start out a little differently, though, and instead of the normal ruckus, it's soft music that starts up and Frigga has her hand in Clint's, leading him out onto the floor. The archer is a good dancer and Tony briefly wonders what he and the Queen are chatting about, but then everyone is pairing up to join in on the slow dance. Natasha grabs onto Thor and Sif snags Steve. Bruce and his as of yet unnamed Aesir lady-friend find each other pretty quickly too and Tony just stands back, watching. He's smiling a bit, but then he remembers the last time he got to dance like that and he has to look away. To distract from the painful memory, he stands, clutching the life-line of his cane and moving back to the edges of the room, like he has every night of feasting so far.

"If you are looking for a dance partner", a voice interrupts, "then I am more than willing". Turning around, it's Loki, standing close at hand and watching Tony avidly. Up close like this, the engineer notices that the braid Loki had taken to wearing was threaded with thin gold strings and the occasional emerald gemstone, creating the illusion that Loki was wearing a circlet of shiny metal wrapped from temple to temple. His hair is still pulled back in a ponytail and it makes Tony wonder how long the god has been letting his hair grow, and why. He also can't help but be curious about what it would look like hanging loose, since it's always been pulled back. For a moment, he can picture it - long waves of onyx hair hanging in flowing locks around his pale face, the braid still pulled back with the precious metals woven in. It must be able to reach down to the small of the god's back, at least, and as Tony imagines it, the image changes until it's Loki naked, body hidden by nothing but his hair. That's definitely something he can see the god doing, playing coy and stretched out on the red satin of Tony's sheets at home. The thought sends a rush of arousal through his system, but before he has to start worrying about beating a hasty retreat from the public eye, Loki speaks up again. "That was an attempt to ask for a dance", the god says with a smirk, but there is something a little hesitant in his gaze - as if rejection is imminent.

Coughing, Tony attempts to clear the dirty images from his mind, but it doesn't help that he already knows how Loki looks spread on his bed, body flushed and panting with wisps of hair clinging to the pale, sweaty skin of his jaw. It's a dangerous line of thought to be following in public, so he shuts them away (for later viewing - oh he's getting too old for this kind of feeling). It takes a great force of will, though, to focus on the Loki in front of him who is still fully clothed and not moaning in pleasured abandon. "No, its ah-", he starts, not wanting to admit to just how much his leg prevented him from doing. Even an easy slow dance can hurt, and he already can feel the aches that a spin around the room would cause. "I don't dance much anymore", he finally settles on, "Haven't really got the legs for it".

Loki's eyes drop, lingering on Tony's right leg and his cane. It feels like being examined, and Tony shifts awkwardly under the scrutiny, which draws Loki's attention back to him. The god's gaze has turned a bit more serious in nature, but he only steps to Tony's side, settling against the wall. Loki stays there for quite some time, keeping Tony silent company until Frigga pulls away from the dancing and smiles at Loki. Only then does the trickster move away, speaking a quiet goodbye and then turning to his mother. Tony watches him walk away, not really sure what to make of all that, but then Clint passes by yammering on about cell phones to a few Aesir women, and Tony lets himself
be drawn into the conversation.

* * *

He's sitting in the garden, waiting. It's raining, the droplets cold against his skin, and he wants to flee from the chill - it's still an unpleasant sensation and he has an instinctive fear that the cold will reveal the secret he still keeps. It's not Asgard's place to know that their second prince is of a different realm, and while keeping such a thing from the people might have long reaching effects, he cannot really care. He refuses to give up his name or his family just for the peace of mind. And after all, who doesn't expect the God of Lies to be keeping a secret or two.

But Loki hopes that the rain won't chase Anthony away from him. It could only be his luck that on this one night, he would be the one left waiting. Not any less than you deserve, his inner thoughts shame him, giving voice to the guilt he can't escape - he might never fully be rid of it. Before his thoughts spiral further down, though, he hears movement at the entrance to the garden - someone pausing in the doorway, as if debating whether or not to brave the weather. They must decide that it's worth the risk of a chill, however, as they move slowly in along the twisting path. Loki cannot help but sigh in relief as he hears the soft tap of a cane amongst the footsteps and he knows it is Anthony.

Loki doesn't look up when he hears the movement stop, knowing that the mortal must have seen him now. The god is seated on the bench that he knows Anthony would normally occupy, and he has been for some time now. He had come out here not long after escorting his mother away from the feast, nearly two hours ago. He does move, however, when Anthony steps closer, seeming to have gotten over his hesitance. Loki slides sideways on the bench, but the mortal doesn't sit, choosing to remain standing over the god. "You look like a drowned cat".

Blinking, Loki looks up, on the verge of confusion and hurt, but he sees mischief and humor in Anthony's stare as the man continues to stand there. It makes something lighten in Loki's chest - it should be ridiculous that even a little teasing from the genius before him should make everything so much better, but he can never quite manage to feel that way. Despite their earlier discussion in the library, he really starts to think that maybe he hasn't ruined everything yet. The small quirk of Anthony's lips only feeds the hope inside him, and he can't help but smile back. "Still better than a petulant dwarf".

"Short jokes", Anthony scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Can't you come up with something a bit more original?" Oh, how easy it is to slip back into their banter and insults now, and it still feels like no little miracle. It is almost impossible to believe that there is a chance for forgiveness after so long and after the man had shut down Loki's attentions on that first night. But Loki has come to realize that seduction will get him nowhere and he has taken great pains to be more sincere and open with his feelings for Anthony. It isn't easy, of course, because even now Loki has difficulty with trusting people, but he will make every attempt if that is what Anthony needs to see.

It's only when the man himself shifts before Loki that the god realizes he has gotten lost in the drift of his mind. Anthony doesn't comment on it even as Loki returns to the present, neither does the man look like he is about to flee; his smile has only turned more somber, with the light of good humor lost from his eyes. Loki finds he misses that alone quite sharply, and he wants to see that light in Anthony's eyes always, but first...
"I have an offer for you, Anthony". Loki says it as neutrally as possible, hoping that this won't be too much, too soon. He can't help the urgency he feels, though, as if at any moment this will all fall apart. "It cannot escape you that I have the means, through magic, to heal you".

"There's nothing to heal", is Anthony's response, and Loki's eyes snap to his face, expecting anger or perhaps bitterness. It's general confusion that he sees, though, as if the mortal cannot understand that anything has happened to him - as if Loki cannot see every new line on his face, or the extra silver in his hair. And not even a fool could miss how the man's leg pains him, even if the cane were not enough to make it obvious. Loki wants to shout at this bemusement from his former lover; he wants to shake Anthony and yell about how much has changed. The man who stands out in the rain with Loki now has aged, and it almost feels as if one day Anthony walked away young and returned only a moment later so much older.

Loki, though, does nothing but speak, hands kept pressed to the bench at his sides. "I could heal your leg so it no longer pains you and so you could fight again". In fact, Loki could heal much more than that and there is an apple of gold sitting in his room that could attest to that, but he doesn't offer that to Anthony. He has no doubt that an offer of immortality would not be welcome at this stage and he would rather wait than be rejected now.

And it is good that Loki decided as such, because even this offer is being turned down as Anthony only laughs with something like surprise. "You want to fix my leg?", the mortal man questions, a thin veil of false amusement covers the inherent suspicion this encounter is evoking in Anthony. "Why?"

"You might think of it as a penance for what I have done", Loki suggests. As much as it might seem better to admit to the truth - that he can't let Anthony live like this; can't let him die like this - he won't. The genius might ask for vulnerability from him, but it took a life debt for Loki to reveal his secrets before, and that had ended with mindless panic and a need for comfort and closeness. Now, though, that need was gone - Loki didn't need his ex-lover back, he could live as well without, but he wanted, and that was much more potent.

There was nothing else, after all, that Loki felt this way about. He had a family, even if it wasn't perfect, and he could count on Sif as a friend. His position in Asgard was stable and most everyone was pleased with his naming as Royal Advisor - he had a place for himself and a comfortable life. It was even happy on occasion, such as when his mother and he conspired against Thor. But how he wanted more; he wanted to be happy with Anthony at his side for an eternity, as if the man's presence could amplify those good feelings. He craved what they once had, but even more, he desired what they could have been if the world and circumstance hadn't stood between them.

"That's not the real reason", Anthony returns; it's a statement, not a question. But the man must not be bothered by Loki's hidden motives - or maybe he sees through them - as he sighs, sitting next to Loki on the bench. It puts them on equal ground, but Anthony doesn't turn immediately to Loki, instead he's staring out across the darkened sky at the stars hidden behind rain clouds. "There's no point in fixing my leg when I won't live long enough to really enjoy it", he says with a sigh.

Almost instantly, Loki is frantic, barely suppressing the panic that talk of Anthony's death causes him. No, he wants to scream, I haven't gotten you back yet - I need more time. He doesn't say that, though he has turned sideways on the bench to face Anthony, his hands flitting uselessly towards the mortal but too afraid to touch. "Is there something wrong? Are you ill?", he questions desperately, wanting to just fix it so that he can keep Anthony always.
"I'm old", the mortal explains, shaking his head at Loki's question, and yes, Loki already knew that, but most mortals lived into their eighth decade - Anthony still had time, surely. "And I have spent sixty-five years putting my body through shit". Anthony glances over, pausing as if he sees something unexpected, but what that can be, Loki could care less about. It does get the man to turn slightly too, though, so now they face each other as much as the bench will allow. "Bruce says he's surprised I haven't died of a heart attack already, what with the arc reactor, the past poisoning, being a superhero, and all the drinking I've done. I look well enough on the outside, especially since I've cleaned myself up, but it's too little too late". Anthony sighs and Loki feels his breath catch in his throat, because it's a sad sound, and he never wants to hear it from this man ever again. "Honestly, no one expects me to see seventy".

Loki wants to stop talking about this; he wants to drag Anthony back to his room and force the golden apple down the mortal's throat so that he doesn't have to worry. He can feel a hand twitching to reach out and do exactly that, but he doesn't give in. Immortality - or something close to it - isn't an easy choice, and he won't force it upon this man. But maybe he can still persuade. "What if I could give you a means to see seven hundred?" He tries to sound nonchalant with the question, but there is no doubt that the desperation shines through.

Anthony's eyes narrow slightly, but then an expression of understanding blooms upon his face. Loki has mentioned the apples of Idunn's garden before and the genius must remember what properties they bear. But even as he seems to be considering it - even as Loki feels there might be some hope for this offer - Anthony shakes his head, declining immortality. "Living forever sounds nice enough, but only if you have something to live for".

And with that, something in Loki breaks apart, and he feels anger bubbling up inside him, almost choking him with its intensity. This mortal - his mortal - is not allowed to think or feel this way. "You are a fool", the god spits out, just managing to restrain himself from touching Anthony. "You are a fool if you think you have nothing to live for. You are a hero and a genius. You are an inventor who seeks to better his world. You are Iron Man!" Loki cannot believe that Anthony would just give up on his own future. He can't allow the man to just die so passively.

"I'm not Iron Man anymore", the man shoots back, voice a low growl. He is agitated, but Loki is too, and he cannot find it in himself to care overly much at the moment. He does notice that Anthony's hand is pressed down onto his injured leg, almost subconsciously blaming it for his situation. "I can't work the suits anymore".

"You were not Iron Man because of the suits you flew in, Anthony Stark", Loki hisses. "You were Iron Man because you chose to fight for others and because you chose to be their hero! It was not some metal armor that made you into that man! As long as there is someone who needs saving, or a life that can be improved, you have a reason to live." Loki's voice drops, coming out softer and deeper, but with a lifetime of emotion behind it. "As long as someone loves you, you have a reason to live".

What Loki has said doesn't immediately register with himself - the words had just flown out of his mouth, but while they are true, they are far too revealing. They hint at a secret that Loki has kept for twenty long years, but Anthony is smart, too smart to miss the implications there. And as the mortal's eyes widen, Loki realizes his mistake. Too much too soon is screaming through his head, and when Anthony leans away, the panic claws at him. Any anger is hollowed away, anxiety and doubts filling the space within Loki as Anthony quickly stands, taking a step back, then another and another until he is fleeing the garden, all without his eyes ever leaving the god. Loki doesn't chase or follow after; he doesn't even think he can move properly, or breathe. His mistake still echoes in the air around him, trapping Loki in a prison of his own making, and he sits in silent panic, staring at the spot where
Anthony had been.

Chapter End Notes

Funny things the artists says:
"I love how Tony uses science as a verb and books as flirting. Bruce is the best. And it really says something about the Avengers' baseline weirdness levels that can calmly discuss whether Tony's ex-boyfriend left him because he got knocked up. Also, Natasha. Natasha. I love that woman with a burning passion. She and Loki should really hang out and be scary awesome together. And oh my god, Loki wears a braid now? Why you do this to me??? If I spend the entire next week doing nothing but drawing Loki getting his Venus on and fail to finish my illustrations in time, we all know whose fault that will be, don't we? Anyway, I'm pretty sure that the braid is from when he and Sif have sleepovers and talk about boys. He and Thor are just the prettiest of princesses. But that last scene though... I am suffering a slow death by stubborn intractable self-loathing morons. How they fooled anyone into thinking they were epic genius masterminds, I will never know. I can't wait for the climax to come along and punch them both in the face."
There was something Loki found to be incredibly freeing about his forced revelations to Tony Stark. It had been terrifying to the point of panic at the time, and it still was if he dwelled on the situation, but Loki had found a distraction in Stark too, and so he didn't have time to worry. The taste of sweat and lust on the man's sun-dark skin kept the fears at bay, too lost under the hazy mask of desire to haunt Loki's mind. This new freedom of touch that they had established eased both their terrors, but it was dissatisfying at times, as Loki couldn't see why Stark wanted or allowed this, and the need to know burned under his skin.

It wasn't pity; the man's own sorrows and suffering made him incapable of such a petty feeling, and Loki would not stand his company were that Stark's motivation. It could have been sympathy, perhaps; at the very least that is what had led Stark to save his life, but it wasn't what had formed their physical relationship. Sympathy was only a passive emotion, allowing Loki to live, but it would not bring forth the desire that Stark eagerly displayed upon their continued meetings in secrecy. For a short while, he thought that it might have been the vulnerability that Loki had exposed for Stark, giving the man power over a god, which any would find heady and intoxicating. But no, for when Stark had told his own story, he had placed the two on equal ground, both fully exposed to the other. Then maybe, he began to believe, it was the lack of hidden thoughts between them. Loki had left nothing out of his telling, not an emotion or action that Stark did not now know, and the man accepted this as it was given. He had trusted Loki enough to take his words for the whole truth, and gave just as much in return. It was brutal and undisguised honesty that Loki had never experienced with another, and it seemed to force them together at every turn. Not that Loki would complain, as physical intimacy had been lacking from his life ever since the loss of his last child, and Stark could provide pleasure unlike any other the god had ever bothered to bed.

So it was only the search for a pleasant amusement that drove Loki into Stark's bed nearly every night for seven months, or that was what Loki would let himself believe. He chose to remain ignorant of - wilfully ignored, even - the signs that there was more than just sexual gratification to their relationship. He did not acknowledge that in his world of lies and misdeeds, Stark was something he not only relied upon, but that he trusted. He didn't doubt that the man would open his arms and his bed for Loki's use at any time; he didn't hesitate to visit the man when he felt darkness gnawing at the edges of his sanity; he didn't think twice of telling Stark his efforts for the day, or the mayhem that he caused which was too small to grab the Avengers' notice.

And he trusted that no matter what crimes he committed or damage he wrought, that Stark would still let him go free at the end of the battle, and that the man would not alert his teammates when he returned in the stillness of the night.

Now, in the drunken bliss of orgasm, Loki found he could rest easily at Stark's side. Suspicion and distrust were far from his thoughts at Stark's tongue and lips ran across Loki's chest, cleaning up the cum that had been spilt between them. It was almost a ritual established between them - a tradition started by Stark and continued on between the both of them, cleaning each other with slow licks, the brush of expensive towels, and soft kisses as the high of sex turned to oversensitivity. Loki did not dwell on the gentleness of the gesture, either on Stark's part or on his own, instead focusing on the familiar brush of short stubble against his skin. It was not something that Loki had every really
thought to enjoy before, but as with much that Stark did, the god found himself craving it all the same.

"Where's your head at tonight?" The question brought Loki out of his musing, and he found that Stark had stopped without him even noticing. Large brown eyes still alight with energy - something Stark seemed to possess in immeasurable quantities - stared up at Loki from where the mortal had rested his cheek on Loki's stomach. This question was almost as familiar now as the feel of Stark's body against his, as the man always seemed to know whenever Loki's mind wandered. It was rather impressive, as no one had ever proven so reliably insightful before.

"Somewhere far more pleasant to escape your obnoxious presence", Loki returned, but it was a lie. It was a very blatant lie, in fact - one so obvious that Stark couldn't even take offence, merely smirking before dropping a kiss just above Loki's navel.

"Good try, babe". The demeaning pet name should rankle, though Loki couldn't help but find it oddly charming. "But we all know that 'with me' is your favorite place to be".

Loki snorted dismissively, but again, Stark did not believe him. Nor should he, for they both knew the truth of it all - Loki had nowhere else to go, not when his mind started to slip away from him and the voices of madness whispered in his ears. At these times, his solitary life provided no comforts, and while Thor was foolish enough to open his door and his heart to Loki, the god could never understand what the depths of his not-brother's mind held. Perhaps Stark couldn't either, but he could see enough to hazard a guess, and it made him cautious.

Maybe that was why it was Stark who Loki took solace with, the two often holing up together in the Malibu home where they had started this. Stark knew what threat Loki posed to him; he knew very intimately what the god was capable of, and yet he still would hold him at night. Stark wasn't acting out of fear - he often was the one instigating fights, as if he wanted Loki to hurt him, kill him even. It was as if the desire that Stark felt somehow outweighed his own safety, or fed into his self-destructive nature, and Stark embraced the dangerous side of Loki as readily as any other facet Loki chose. No matter how Loki was to appear - vulnerable, angry, terrified, maniacal, gleeful - Stark took it all in stride, never hesitating to touch or prod or tease Loki. He was the perfect receptor for whatever Loki needed to express, an outlet the god had never had before, nor even guessed that he needed.

In the absence of any answers from Loki, Stark had taken to his ritual again, nuzzling at the pale stretch of Loki's stomach while a hand settled at the sensitive spot on Loki's side, just below the edge of his ribs. It burned hot against his flesh, and while the heat was normally welcome, the darkness had not fully receded yet, The whispers took up again, harsh voices grating against his thoughts as they spoke of Frost Giants and ice-hearted beasts, kin killers and blue demons hiding behind fleshy masks. It wouldn't do - it wasn't enough, and Loki moved with all his speed, aiming to have Stark again.

He had Stark beneath him in only a moment, with no struggle from the mortal. It seemed Stark had already realized what was happening, and the man merely spread his legs, wrapping them around Loki's waist and pulling. Loki followed the silent direction, only sparing a moment to think outside his own pleasure and make sure that Stark was properly stretched with a touch of magic. It was sufficient, so Loki pushed in roughly, movement violent, but no more so than Stark had proven he could handle. Still, he moved hard and fast, revelling in the writhing tightness of Stark's body as he drowned out the mad whispers with his mortal's cries. Loki was losing himself to the pleasure - no, he was giving in to it, letting the feel of it wash away all thoughts but moremoremore and mineminemine, growling it into the skin of Stark's neck.
By the time a large bang echoed through the house, Loki was already lost in the heady desire, not even hearing the sound of pounding feet running through the halls. As the secret life he had built was being torn down, he was too far gone to care.

***

Tony was drowning - drowning in pleasure too sweet to fight. Not that he was particularly bothered, or that he wanted to fight, but the rush of endorphins through his blood was enough to make his head spin dangerously, and it was always bad to lose his head around Loki. Not because the god would maim or kill him - they were a bit past that phase in their relationship - but because Loki always went full out to get what he wanted, especially in bed. Luckily, Tony could provide, whether the god wanted a willing body to rut into or a lover to tease him for hours. Still, that required some intelligent thought on Tony's part, but Loki seemed determined to fuck the brains out of both of them.

All in all, that was something Tony could go along with, but this whole weekend had ended up being one crazy fuck-fest. It hadn't even been one of their planned meet-ups, where Tony took a short vacation in Malibu to escape the Avengers and Loki would join him there. There was a standing rule that Loki would never stay at the Tower, as that was where the Avengers were staying, but sometimes the god would pop in to nab Tony before teleporting them both across the country for a bit of privacy. That was how the first night had played out, but this time there had been a charity gala involved. Loki had shown up in the Stark Tower ballroom where hundreds of guests and all the Avengers were gathered, slinking his way through the crowd until he found Tony.

At the time, despite the risk of being out in public with a barely-disguised Loki - turning his hair ginger blonde was not enough to hide his distinctive cheekbones - Tony couldn't turn him away. The night of dancing and fake pleasantries had already worn the genius down, and the haunted look in Loki's eyes was enough to drive him out of the party, pulling Loki with him until they were secluded enough to teleport. Tony had only expected for things to last the night, with Loki taking him back to the Tower in the morning, but nothing seemed to satiate the god. Over the span of two days, they would fuck and then sleep, with only a few breaks for food in-between the cycles of sex. And even then, it was only the simple sandwiches that his bots could make, delivered directly to their bed. Loki wouldn't allow him to be gone for more than a few minutes at a time.

Tony thought to complain several times about this kind of enslavement, but every time Loki woke him up with thrashing nightmares, or failed to hide behind his crumbling mask of sanity, the protests would die on his tongue. To demand that Loki leave now, when he needed the company and distraction, would be to turn the god away forever. Besides, to be needed was a heady rush, and to be needed by a god... it was more intoxicating than any amount of alcohol or adrenaline could be. So Tony never said no when Loki turned pleading eyes to him, and it left him on his back under a god desperately seeking something more than just pleasure of the flesh.

Loki was losing it above him, Tony could see. The trickster's face was buried into his neck, panting heavily and grunting on occasion. Pale hands were fisted into the sheets at Tony's sides, and his hips drove their bodies together in a rhythm that lacked any finesse. Loki didn't seem to be truly present at all, mind lost as his body focused on reaching climax, and that desperation made something deep in Tony ache - farther hidden in his chest than just the building release he could feel. The man moved his hands up from Loki's hips, where they had been encouraging the god, to loop around Loki's chest and neck, pulling them closer together. Loki let out a soft whimper as their chests met, sliding against each other in the natural slick of their sweat.

It was a mess of sexual highs and suppressed emotions, the air thick with mounting tension. Tony
could feel it buzzing along his skin, even as he felt Loki driving hard into his body. It made him hold the trickster close, as if the god was falling apart and only Tony's arms could hold him together. It might not have been entirely inaccurate, as Loki's body began to shiver and quake with tremors, and the pitch of his breathless noises rose. One of Tony's hands found its way into the god's hair, grasping the strands of it tightly as he pressed Loki's face tighter to his neck. Turning his head only slightly, Tony could nuzzle the god's ear, pressing a gentle kiss there, though it was discordant with the harsh movements of Loki's body. The gesture drew another whimper from Tony's god, one that was almost pained.

"C'mon, Lokes", Tony whispered, lips pressed to the trickster's ear. It was encouragement and compassion in one breath, and a shudder rolled through Loki's body at the sound of it. "C'mon", the genius urged, pulling tighter on the god's body. "Come for me, Loki". It was enough, and the god climaxed with a keening cry, burying himself into Tony as much as biology would allow. The noise and feel of Loki's release triggered Tony's own, and he too came, back arching to press himself against Loki as he cried out. The pleasure burned white-hot through his body, and it left Tony shaking in his skin.

Through the haze of orgasm, he could feel Loki trembling against him, body wracked with shivers from the power and meaning behind what they had done - from the beginning up until this moment. He held the god to him, saying nothing, not even to lighten the mood. Tony wasn't sure he could, or that he wanted to - the immensity of it all was weighing on him too, and his throat was choked with things that he had never said before. There were words he couldn't find - sentiments he couldn't vocalize - and they burned like acid in his stomach, almost physically painful. Instead, he just held the shaky god to him, hoping that it would be enough to convey what he couldn't speak. Maybe it was, because Loki's head was raised, eyes blinking blearily open to stare at Tony, openly vulnerable, and then the god began to speak-

A crash and shouting voiced shattered the moment.

Whatever Loki had intended to say was gone, chased away by the Avengers as they stormed into the room. The looks on their faces as anger and alarm faded to shock was almost amusing, but they didn't have time to process, not with Loki and Tony both still reeling from their own emotional turmoils. But then the team slipped easily back into fighting mode - except for Bruce, who hadn't Hulked out yet - and Tony held Loki closer to him even as he told the god to leave. "Go", was all it for Loki to give Tony a small squeeze back before disappearing. Tony was left feeling cold and empty, with the crackle of magic fading in his ear, and a whole room full of disapproving faces staring him down.

Chapter End Notes

Shit the artist says:
"I love you, man. Really. Do whatever you want with whatever you want. Just don't lie to me. You're totally not at all sorry about the feelings.

Seriously though, that insight into their relationship was awesome. I was kind of skeptical about Loki just laying out all his cards like he did, but this reasoning makes
sense. He got to clear the air with someone in a way he never could with anyone else. They have no illusions about each other, no misunderstandings or unreasonable expectations (other than not being a dick, apparently - looking at you, Loki). Also thank you for writing a sex scene that actually makes sense and serves a purpose within the context of the story. All too often, sex scenes feel obligatory, like 'whoops, I wrote five thousand words and thus far none of them were cock - must be time for some sexing!", and the entire story just grinds to a halt so the author can raise the rating. This one was in character and served a purpose and was quite sexy. Excellent, really. And I like how they've been steadily banging for seven months and are only now beginning to get the creeping suspicion that they might have feelings for each other. Damnit, Avengers! How can you be superheroes with such terrible timing?"

"You will not make me draw mythology Loki. You won't. I've got stuff to do. Other stuff. Stuff that is most definitely not clever devious redheads who wrote the book on snark. It's not happening, alright?"
Tony has plans for today.  

It starts with getting up early - early enough to make breakfast, but he still skips just to keep up appearances. Then, once he finally convinces himself that he needs to roll out of bed, he manages to stumble into the private bath attached to his room, stripping carelessly before plopping down into the steaming hot water. It doesn't do much to actually wake him up, but the heat does wonders in easing the tension of sleep from his muscles. He can't quite remember when sleeping started to equal morning stiffness, but he does know that today, he's going to need all the extra help he can get. Especially his knee, as he has promised Frigga that he would take a tour of Asgard with her as his guide. There might have been a heavily implied 'about time you got around to it' on the Queen's part, though he can't fault her for that. He has been avoiding it rather steadfastly.

It's not that he doesn't want to see all of Asgard; he would actually like that a lot. But Tony's only got a month - well, just a week now - and cultural exploration has never been his thing. With what time he has, the genius would much rather spend it studying all the science and magical theory he can absorb. Playing tourist seems like such a waste in the mean time, and while he can recognize that the Aesir might view that as offensive, he can't be bothered to care. He's only got a few years left to live, and he is going to spend that time as he pleases, not giving in to the pressures of polite society that would demand him to do otherwise.

But Frigga had not only asked if he would accompany her out today, she had assured him that the trip would be well worth the effort made. After everything the Queen has done to not only make him feel comfortable, but to reassure him of Loki's motives, he couldn't turn her down. Plus, he trusts her, so if Frigga says it is worth it, than Tony doesn't doubt that it will be. Maybe there is someone out in the city proper who can provide more information on the Bifrost.

Unfortunately, Tony's mind is drifting while he bathes, and it's only when he steps out that he realizes he's late. The timepiece in his room - which can really only be called a magical sundial - shows that breakfast has been over for nearly half an hour, which means he needs to get his ass in gear. He practically dives into his bags to drag out jeans and a t-shirt, forgoing a jacket as he scrambles into his clothes. Then he slides on a pair of socks and tennis shoes before launching himself out the door, moving as quickly as he can with a limp. His hair is still wet, dripping cold down the back of his neck. Some of it falls into his face, and when he catches a glimpse of silver from the corner of his eye, he pushes the hair back with an annoyed huff. As much as he knows that he makes sixty-five look good, it's still sixty-five, and it's still easily seen.

But the griping about his age falls to the wayside as he finally reaches the main foyer of the palace, head darting around as he looks for Frigga. His shoes make a horrible squeaking noise on the ground, which makes him wince, but there's no one in the hall to complain about the sound. It's empty; Frigga's not there.

Tony sighs, disappointed not only in that he's missed out on another chance at a tour, but also because he has let down the Queen too. He silently curses his own absent-mindedness, a hand running through his damp hair, but a voice startles him.
"My mother sends her apologies". It's Loki who steps forward as Tony turns; the god peels away from the shadows where he had apparently been waiting for Tony. "Some urgent business arrived at her door late last night, and so she has sent me to attend to you in her place".

"Oh", is Tony's only clever reply. He is still off-kilter from Loki's offer of immortality from the night before - it's not often someone wants to give him eternal life. To be perfectly honest, Tony isn't really sure how he feels about that, or the insinuation that Loki likes - loves - him. He had secretly hoped that by spending the day out with Frigga, the genius could easily avoid his ex, and all the feelings their meeting would bring. Either way, fate - or Frigga's scheming - has now forced them together for an entire day. Well, unless Tony chooses to back out and find something else to do.

Loki appears hesitant for a moment, then a polite mask falls into place. "If that is a problem for you, I can take my leave". His tone is forcibly nonchalant and uncaring, but Loki's eyes are doing that pleading thing again, and Tony knows he can't walk away now.

Instead, he sighs and heads for the door that leads to the city outside. "I was promised awesome things and I want to see them", he says, glancing sideways at Loki. "So get to showing me the awesome things". Loki's grin is quicksilver and relieved, but gone in a second before he takes the lead and heads outside.

"As you wish", the god replies, and then he sets off with Tony falling into step beside him.

***

The first stop on the tour is well into the city, and after quite a lot of walking. But it's the most important part of the day that Loki has planned out, and if this one thing is well received by Anthony, then it will be good luck for everything else. From the outside, it doesn't look like much, and while Loki is well aware how appearances can deceive - *pale skin into blue, green becoming red* - Anthony seems distinctly underwhelmed. Then again, the god has already heard from his mother that the genius had been less than impressed by the sights of Asgard on his initial arrival. It had brought a smile to his face, hearing the tale from his mother, as it's just as his mortal has always been. It is so very Tony Stark - whatever the gods might build, he can build it better.

Loki just smiles to himself now, though, at the man's reaction. The building before them is no more than a plain building along a street of plain buildings, with nothing to distinguish it from any other, at least from the outside. Despite all outward appearances, though, this one house holds what is arguably the greatest of Asgard's hidden treasures, though it is not of Asgard itself. As such, Loki feels no need to linger outside, instead pushing open the door to hurry his mortal in.

The inside is no more impressive than the out, at least it is so to an untrained eye. This is because it is not the architecture of drab walls and a dirt floor which are of import, but the metal weapons and designs which adorn them. This is the home and workplace of a great smith, hiding in plain sight and only to be found by those who know the worth of his work. Loki knows, as he makes it a point to know what genius resides within his family's realm, but Anthony - clever, biting, genius Anthony - can easily read the mastery of this smith by the curves of metal in his weapons, and by the blends of light they cast in reflection. Anthony's eyes are alight with the burning of energetic curiosity, and they flit from piece to piece, studying every twist of the smith's works without moving form the doorway.

A grin spreads across Loki's face; he can't keep away the happiness he feels at Anthony's genuine
excitement. A voice from the adjacent room, however, burns away the sincerity of his smile.

"It's about damn time you showed up, My Prince". There is only contempt in that statement. There is no respect to be given to Loki here, and it makes him bristle, but he keeps any angered reaction at bay by looking to his genius mortal, who is so enraptured by what he is being shown. So Loki makes no comment even as a disheveled dwarf saunters into the room, unbearably smug as he looks at the two of them. "At least you have the decency to bring me a guest with good taste", the dwarf comments, eyeing Anthony, who has only just pulled his attention away from the masterpieces along the walls.

Loki steps between the two other men, taking it upon himself to make introductions before the dwarf can insult him anymore. "This is Anthony Stark of Midgard, the foremost of their craftsmen", the god says, waving an arm out to Anthony, who looks amused with the introduction. Catching the mortal's eye, Loki gestures to the dwarf. "And this is Bjork, the sole Dwarvish metalsmith on Asgard". Bjork preens under the title, and Loki has to bite his tongue lest he ruin the moment with something bitter. He does not like the dwarf at all, but Anthony is clearly pleased with this, taking the dwarf's hand and shaking it eagerly.

"Your work is incredible", Anthony says without preamble, already turning to one piece on the wall - a two-toned shield that seems to shift and change under the light. "What metals do you use for these, and how do you get them to blend so smoothly?"

And so begins the rapid-fire exchange of information, Loki left to only watch on as Anthony and Bjork speak of things he only vaguely know. Soon enough, the two move to another room, where a forge is set up, and Bjork begins to work, demonstrating some technique or another for the curious genius. It makes Loki smile despite how uncomfortable and ignored he is; he rather prefers it this way, when he can just watch Anthony in something much closer to his natural environment, working away over the heat of distorting metal. Sometimes, Bjork will look at him and scowl, or smirk haughtily, and it should grate along Loki's nerves, but the feeling is always soothed away when Anthony glances at him with a smile of excitement, almost like a small child despite his obvious age.

The whole morning passes like this, but Bjork has only so much patience for Loki's presence, and there are other things the god would show Anthony, so he drags the mortal away from the forge, setting them both back into the street and moving along.

"So, Bjork isn't exactly a big fan of yours then", Anthony says almost immediately, before Loki can even begin to question the mortal about whether he has enjoyed himself. It's a query that catches Loki slightly off guard, but that is just the way Anthony has always been, and it shouldn't surprise him now.

"No", Loki answers with a drawl, not quite wanting to speak of this. "But he is a dwarf, and there is no dwarf who would be a fan of Loki Liesmith". Anthony merely looks sideways at him, an eyebrow raised to further question the god. Loki sighs before speaking again, not wishing to talk of the dwarves or their feelings of him when he is spending time with Anthony. "While the dwarves do not find glory in honor and nobility like those of Asgard, they no more care for those of sly tongue and tricks than the gods do".

Anthony hums in thought, as if this is something to take under consideration, but then he just shrugs. "Their loss", he dismisses. "I've always like the tricky ones myself - they're more fun". Loki's mind is suddenly twirling about - is Anthony talking of him? Or is there someone else he is thinking of? Maybe the man is just speaking in general, with no inflection intended either way, and Loki is just thinking too hard? No matter what the answer, though, it drags Loki into a swirl of questions that
chase each other about, with no solution in sight. It is only when Anthony speaks again that he can quiet his thoughts. "But now, I'm suddenly insulted by all the time you have called me a dwarf. I am much better looking than they are".

And that - that off-hand comment about something so ridiculous - is what startles a laugh from Loki, a true and full-bodied laugh of amusement. It alarms some of the people in the street with them, but Anthony smiles along like it is what he had intended from the start, and maybe it is. Despite all that, though, and despite what an odd sight he must make, Loki cannot be bothered to care. He's laughing for the first time in a long while, and he has Anthony cheerful and alive at his side, and they are exploring Asgard together. Loki cannot care about anything beyond how he feels right now, as if all the darkness and guilt that permeate him are slowly falling off, each step through Asgard carrying him farther away from the past.

It's such a light-hearted feeling that he can't help but smile through the rest of the tour, and Anthony seems to share the feeling as well, if his own smile can be counted. Nor does Loki hesitate when, hours later, they are about to part ways, and instead, he asks the genius to dinner with him - a private affair in his own rooms. It's not a problem, because Anthony doesn't refuse, doesn't reject him, instead agreeing before heading off with a quick 'see you later'. Loki is still smiling when he tells the staff to set up a meal in his chambers, and then he heads off himself to clean up from this wonderful day on the town.

* * *

Oh god, Tony is panicking, and he has gone insane. He just accepted to eat a private dinner with Loki in *Loki's own fucking bedroom*. Shit, he really shouldn't put fucking and Loki's bedroom in a sentence together, it isn't good for his blood pressure, or something medical like that. He can't help it, though, because that tour was pretty cool - totally fucking awesome, if he's honest with himself, which he's trying not to be. And Loki had been smiling like a crazy, happy bastard the entire day, as if just watching Tony have fun was good enough. Maybe it was, because Loki was just crazy like that, but still, that didn't mean that Tony should have actually accepted the dinner invite, but he did because Loki looked happy and he didn't want to ruin that.

Now, though, as he's on his way to that very dinner, he is having serious regrets, coupled with something that is suspiciously like butterflies in his stomach. That would mean nervousness for most people, but Tony Stark doesn't get nervous, except what else is there to describe this odd mix of terror and anticipation that he's feeling. It makes his steps almost sound timid as he moves through the hallways of Asgard's palace, led by a nameless servant who knows better than to converse with the man. Not that Tony's trying to be a demeaning jerk or anything like that, he just isn't in the mood for pleasantries or idle chatter. It's some small comfort, too, that the feast has already begun, as the hallways are empty. No one gets to see how he moves hesitantly onward towards his impending doom, one last walk for the hanged man. Those morbid thoughts just elicit a dark chuckle from Tony, a black humor settling over him like acceptance.

*After all,* he thinks as the servant raps sharply on Loki's door, *what can go wrong?*

So it's with bleak humor that Tony enters the room after the door swings open. What he finds in Loki's rooms, however, is not at all what he has expected. There is none of Asgard's opulence, and despite how gold is a color that Loki and the rest of Asgard all seem fond of, it's missing from his room too. Actually, it's all rather simplistic, even by Earth standards, and it throws Tony through a serious loop. The walls are a dark green, though it's color is more subdued than the shade Loki
normally wears; soft, creamy yellows break up the heaviness of the deep color, and huge windows framing the back of Loki's bed let in quite a lot of light, though not so much right now, as night is falling. There is also a notable lack of furs - instead, silken-looking sheets and woven blankets adorning the bed. And on top of that, the furniture is sparse, but what is there looks like it was stolen from a stuffy private study room on Earth, which it very well could have been, knowing Loki. He's about to comment on that, too, but then his eyes land on the table where the dinner is set out, and more importantly, on Loki.

The god is standing next to the table, smiling gracefully at Tony with his hands clasped in front of his body, and Tony can't help but notice how absolutely gorgeous he looks. Loki is wearing a robe of sorts, the fabric of it silken and just a few shades short of being a perfect blue-black. It's cut perfectly to the god's body, too, clinging tightly and rather stiffly through the chest, but hanging much more loosely around Loki's arms and legs. There's a tie along the waist that is gold, cinching the robe and emphasizing the immortal's narrow hips and narrower waist. And all along the robe, there is embroidery done in black thread, but it's indiscernible from where Tony stands, the delicate designs hidden by the deep color of the fabric, but they are there, and they draw attention to every little movement of Loki's body in a way that is downright sinful.

What really draws Tony in, though, is that Loki's hair is down. And Tony was right, it does reach the small of his back, but it's not as wavy as he imagined it would be. That could easily be Loki's magic or vanity at play, and Tony has no problem with that if it means he gets to see Loki in what he's starting to realize must be the god's comfort clothes. It makes sense, as they are in Loki's chambers, and so the god would be perfectly alright to just throw on a robe and let his hair down for an informal meal. That does funny things to Tony's heart, and he belatedly realizes that he's been staring but that seems so vastly unimportant at the moment.
Loki says something, but it's lost on Tony as he loses himself in his admiring. The god gestures, a hand extending towards the table, and Tony only stares at the play of fabric as it catches and glides along the hidden muscles of Loki's arms, hinting at power and definition without ever showing it. And then the god turns, moving to sit at the table, and all of his hair moves with him, flowing and running along his back like black liquid. But for all that it's captivating, Tony can still see the dark patches of damp fabric along Loki's back, and his mind jumps to Loki bathing before donning that robe, and he knows that Loki has always preferred going without underwear, especially after a bath. It's a very good thing that his body has already begun to move of its own accord, sitting down at the table across from Loki, because now he doesn't have to worry about any inappropriate reactions his lower anatomy might have to the sex god sitting before him.

It's in a haze of lustful appreciation that the dinner starts, and Tony cannot bring his thoughts away from what he has done to Loki before, and what he would like to do to Loki now. He pays no real thought to the conversation they are having, and he isn't sure if Loki even notices that or not, but it's not something that Tony is in any hurry to change. It takes enough focus just to keep his behavior polite and to not just drool openly at the sight that Loki makes. There are a few times that Tony almost even touches Loki, though they are accidents when their hands nearly brush as they reach for something on the table. Moving their relationship into the physical realm is one of the last things that Tony's rational mind wants, however, and so he flinches away from the contact each time, not willing to risk what having his hands on Loki might lead to.

This delirium of sorts lasts the whole meal, and as servants enter to clear the remnants of their meal away, Tony is on the verge of panicking again. Loki is sitting there, eyeing him up, and if the god makes any advances on him right now, than Tony knows his libido won't say no. That's a serious problem, because even now he has trouble with self-control and temptation, and the god across from him is certainly temptation incarnate. Then - rather suddenly, in Tony's opinion - the servants are gone and the table is cleared. And oh hey, look, Loki isn't sitting anymore. The god is standing, moving around the table with deliberate grace and a soft smirk. That's an 'I want to ravage you' face if Tony's ever seen one, and that isn't a good thing, because if Loki goes for it, then he won't be able to stop, and while the thought makes his blood pound, his mind is screaming that it's a trap - a trick - a betrayal in the making.
Loki's in front of him, now, though, and while he's waiting for Tony to make the next move, the trickster's hands aren't idle. He's playing with his hair, brushed over one shoulder and the black spilling down the front of his chest. Tony's eyes follow the pale hand as it draws through those inky locks, and that was a terrible idea because now he's practically staring at Loki's crotch. The loose play of the fabric there does nothing to hide the growing bulge, and the god has to be at least half-hard already, and it makes Tony want to know what he's thinking of to get so riled up, but at the same time he doesn't. Instead, he forces himself to scoot the chair back, standing and stepping to the side, away from Loki. The god doesn't stop him, only watching with a slowly fading smile as Tony moves.

"I- I think I should probably go now", Tony manages to force out. He's staring holes into a bookshelf along the wall, though, because he doesn't trust himself to look at Loki - for both sexual and emotional reasons. He wants the god so badly, and there is a good chance he's going to need a quick wank before he can sleep tonight, but the idea of actually touching Loki sets off alarm bells in his head. It's a terrifying possibility, and one he can barely concentrate on. He still fears a ploy or plot from Loki, even after such a nice day, but he's also afraid that the god's motives are truly benign. He doesn't want to have a genuine shot with Loki only to blow it in bed because he's older now, and how in the world can he keep up with a god. Especially when that god kept him going until he passed out even before. For fuck's sake, he can hardly even lay flat on his back now, let alone contort his body into some of the more creative positions they've tried, and there is no way he can satisfy Loki like that.

That alone is enough to stop Tony from reaching out and taking hold of Loki like he wants to. If Loki is really sincere in his desire to be with Tony, then he has a chance to spend his last few years with Loki at his side, and that makes the little fluttering of hope in his chest get excited. He does want that, on some level, even though he doesn't quite trust Loki, but he sure as hell doesn't want to fuck that up now with bad sex. He doesn't want to remind Loki of just how old he is, or how little those last few years are going to be of value. He wants Loki, but he doesn't want to admit to the god that Tony's life is practically meaningless in the face of immortality.

So instead, he shies away, sliding sideways towards the door until Loki's hand flies out to stop him. Tony flinches, a shudder wracking his whole body, but Loki doesn't actually touch him, though the god is frowning hard, and he looks disappointed. "You don't have to go", Loki says entreatingly. "Please don't".

"Loki... I don't think that's a good idea", is Tony's only response, and he can't quite bring himself to look Loki in the eye, but he can imagine the dejection there well enough that it still stings him a little. He isn't trying to be hurtful but this is going places that he is definitely not comfortable with, and even if Loki backs off, he's still far too tempting to be near.

"But", Loki starts, and his voice is tremulous. It causes Tony's eyes to finally snap upwards to meet Loki's, and he sees only confusion and pain in them. It doesn't exactly make him feel any better, but he can't afford to give in. "Do you not want me anymore?"

Panic is starting to set in, because that's not true at all, not really, but can't Loki see that this is just too much? It's all making Tony's insides twist and knot, because he wants - but he doesn't. And too, he struggles with the desire to provide comfort by drawing Loki to him, holding the god tightly to his chest like they used to do when the nightmares came, but having the god pressed firmly against his body is not a good idea at the moment. He settles for looking as earnest as he can when speaking, his hand flexing around the grip of his cane. "You know that isn't it, Loki. I just can't do this". He waves towards the bed, hoping that the subject will drop and they can both forget about this.
It doesn't work, though. "But why?", Loki demands. And Tony doesn't want to deal with this, but he knows that Loki won't stop - won't give in until Tony's laid everything out for him and explained to him why, after all this time, it just won't work. Even then, that might not be enough, but Tony's determined to try, pressing a hand to his face and sighing. He's so caught up in trying to calm himself down that he almost doesn't catch the cut-off gasp from Loki, the soft hitch in his breath, but it's there, and Tony stills at the sound of it. Lowering his hand, he watches Loki carefully, eyes narrowed; he wants to know what could get such a reaction from the normally controlled god.

The answer makes itself obvious in how stricken Loki appears, and in how his eyes track Tony's hand. And, well, that's a good a place to start as any, so Tony holds up his hand. He stares wistfully at Loki, letting the light catch on the white-gold marriage band on his finger. "Twenty years might not seem so bad while in Never Never Land, but it's a hell of a long time for me".

Loki looks like his choking at this revelation, and he can't seem to take his eyes off the wedding band, staring hard at it like he can make the thing and all that it means just disappear. Tony doesn't know how to take that, doesn't know if he can say anything to make this less awkward, but he supposes that it is time Loki found out, and better it be from him than anyone else. Maybe he was a bit callous with it all, but Loki was pushing him for answers, and well, the god has them now.

"Congratulations are in order, then", Loki says before Tony can find anything to say himself. "The Lady Pepper is a lucky woman to have you".

That, though, is so ridiculous that it makes Tony laugh. It's an awkward sound, and slightly forced, but what can he do? Sure, Pepper seems like a reasonable choice from the outside, but there is no way in hell it would ever work! "If it was Pepper I married, than I would be too dead to be standing here. She would have killed me before our first anniversary". That's not really funny, but he keeps laughing anyway because he doesn't know what to do. Loki doesn't laugh with him.

"Then whoever your spouse might be, they have done well in choosing you", Loki states in all seriousness, and the god's eyes have dropped to the floor. "I am surprised that they did not join you in viewing the wonders of Asgard. I am sure my brother would not have been so foolish to forget to invite your partner". There is formality and stiffness seeping into the god's tone and posture. Loki sounds less like a dejected suitor and more like a host asking that his guest's needs have been adequately met. The sexual tension is gone from the air, and Tony can hardly wrap his mind around the thought of it being there in the first place.

"No". Tony's voice is a whisper, his throat tight. "Thor did fine... V just couldn't join us". Loki looks as if he's about to offer some meaningless platitude before shooing Tony out, but the man doesn't want to leave things like this. There's more to the story, and now that he's started talking, he just wants to finish it and get the whole thing out. "She died some time back. A few years ago".

The blank mask that Loki had thrown up now fades, and there is sympathy in his eyes - not pity, because Loki knows what loss feels like, Loki has mourned for many before. "My condolences, then", he says, and that doesn't make Tony feel better at all, the weight of V's death - of his wife's death - still heavy in his chest. It doesn't matter that it's been a while, and that he's been moving on just fine; Veronica's death hurts, and not even Loki's presence can really ease that. "Will you tell me of her?"

Tony's head comes up, and he stares in no little confusion at Loki. That isn't what he had expected Loki's reaction to be, but the god looks nothing but sincere, and so Tony lets himself be guided over
to the armchairs in the corner of the room. He is still watching Loki incredulously as the god joins him in sitting, looking earnestly at Tony as if this is how he had wanted to spend their night, though it so obviously isn't.

"Well", Tony begins, and he isn't really sure what to say, but he's let Loki lead him to this, and if it's what the god wants... "Her name was Veronica Benning when I met her, though she took my name eventually - Veronica Benning Stark. I just always called her V. She was my therapist at first, but she was always more than just another doctor, at least to me". Loki is watching him, but there are tears stinging the corner of Tony's eyes as he forces himself to remember everything he can, how it all felt and hurt and was sometimes good too. "She saved my life. She saved it a lot", he admits, voice growing weaker as the emotions swell in him. It's like the confessions of before, when they had both spoken of all their pains and joys and lies and trials, and it hurts just as much now as it did back then. "She hasn't stop saving my life, really".

The words just fall from his lips then, and he doesn't stop them no matter how they burn and tear at his throat, and there are tears on his face, but Loki doesn't comment and so Tony doesn't acknowledge them. He tells Loki of what V did for him, how she fixed him up and left him better than she found him, and how every day she saved his life because he's still alive and he's sober, and that's all thanks to V's influence and determination. He tells Loki how he loved her for all that and more, and how he loves her still, and how he just can't seem to ever take off the band that signifies their ties to each other. He talks about the wedding and how nervous he was while V was so calm, and he doesn't gloss over the happiness of their relationship with each other, or the bad times either. He admits that he wants more time with her, that the four years they had together wasn't nearly enough for him, but it was enough for V to work her own brand of magic and make his life so much better. He cries openly in front of Loki as he nears the story of her death, and that's where he stops. The god doesn't need to hear about that, or about the funeral, or how Tony had to cope, and Tony is too tired and gone to speak of it anyway.

Loki doesn't push or question the man when Tony finally falls silent and his tears are wiped away. Loki stays blissfully and blessedly silent even as Tony makes his move to leave, needing the sleep to wash away the burn of loss in his chest. Nor does Loki touch him even as the genius takes a moment too long in standing, not steady on his feet at all. But Loki does walk with Tony back to his room, as if he is an escort - it's a silent way of showing support and caring, and Tony's a bit grateful for it, especially as he doesn't want to have to shove at the heavy door himself. He lets Loki open it for him, stepping inside before his voice finally comes back. "Thank you", is just a croaked whisper coming from Tony, but it gets a soft smile from the god, and Loki replies before the door shuts between them.

"No, thank you".

Chapter End Notes

The artist has some things to say:

"Ugh, Tony's worries make me so sad. This is why I prefer not to think too hard about relationships between people with vastly different lifespans. Even if Tony agrees to immortality, it just means that he'll be the one outliving all his friends and loved ones.
This ship is not an easy one. On a happier note, that was probably one of the sweetest first dates ever (and how weird is it that after seven months of sexing and twenty years of waiting, this is their actual proper first date?)"
The Significance of Billy Joel

It's almost funny, he thought, that saving Loki's life has cost him his own. He was a hero, he was supposed to save lives, but not the bad guy's, apparently. He had let Loki live, and he had let Loki walk away, and he had let Loki fuck him, and the team didn't like that at all. He was compromised; he was a traitor; he was a sex addict with a danger fetish who put his own cock over other people's lives. It didn't matter that since he and Loki had hooked up, the god's kill count had been zero; it didn't matter that everyone on the team had a kill count themselves; it didn't matter that Tony had never hesitated in battle or helped Loki's plans. It didn't matter because they had had sex, and that was what being compromised was.

Now, Tony found himself on utter lockdown at his Malibu place. He hadn't left it since Loki had brought them both here, but the god had vanished - for which Tony was relieved - and there were SHIELD flunkies hovering around the grounds and at the doors, preventing Tony from leaving at all. It had been a week already, and Tony was beginning to get a bit stir crazy, especially since he was locked out of his actual lab, and could only really tinker around in his garage - they weren't treating him like a proper threat, and that meant the still got access to some toys. But JARVIS was gone, and that made the house far too quiet for Tony's tastes. SHIELD had tried to deactivate the AI, but Tony's work was too good - he had personally deactivated JARVIS as a show of good will, because he didn't want to start any more shit than he already had.

Today, on day eight of his captivity, he had been forced to hear another lecture from Captain Morality on how his behavior was a betrayal to the team, or something like that. It was the same drivel he had to listen to every day, and he just tuned it out. This time, though, Pepper and Rhodey had both gotten the chance to call in to Tony's Malibu prison, and that had been much harder to deal with. Neither of Tony's friends had screamed or yelled or been angry at all - they must have had time to deal with that first instinct of disbelief and ire. Instead, he could feel the waves of disappointment coming off of them, and if not for the two SHIELD agents standing watch, he would have just left the study where their faces were displayed. He had sat through it in silence, making no attempts to defend himself or his actions - he would explain later, when Fury's lackeys were no longer breathing down his neck. Neither Pepper nor Rhodey would understand, of course, but he would try to explain anyway - they deserved that much at least.

Night had eventually fallen, though, and he had sat himself down on the piano bench in his foyer just to watch the sunset, wondering where Loki was. When the sky grew dark, he made no attempt to turn on a light. He was greasy and ragged and tired of it all at the moment - he had been wearing the same jeans for days, and they were torn up and greasier than any other pair he owned. His shirt, too, was ruined with stains, but it didn't bother him. He didn't even notice. He merely ran calloused hands through his dishevelled hair, staring out across the sea that was blacker than the midnight sky above it. He didn't like how it made him feel, like he was staring into an abyss that was unfathomable and insurmountable, and that it would swallow him and he would no longer be Tony, but just a part of the nothingness that had infested him.

It was all Tony could do to turn away from the dark, instead watching the piano in front of him. He stared at it as if the thing could offer up answers of a sort, with it's white keys gleaming in the faint light from his arc reactor, or the sleek black body that reflected nothing and everything back. But that night, it was the nothing he got - it was all just a swirl of nothing and more nothing, and the sounds were nothing and he saw nothing and he felt nothing because the abyss was swallowing him and this time Loki wasn't there - he wasn't there to make the nightmares stop, to keep the memories from bleeding into his reality and the nothing was there, it was coming for him and where was Loki -
he needed Loki where was Loki he needed Loki needed Loki Loki Loki Loki Loki Loki-

The startling sound of a piano key being hit brought the genius abruptly back to reality, and he panted, his own hand the one fisted down on the keys. In his panic, he must have slammed a hand down in front of him, and that had snapped him away from the dark thoughts he had been mired in. There was still no Loki, however, and the house felt empty with only the silence for company. Tony pulled his hand back from the piano, but as the chords faded into the air, he wanted them back. He set his fingers to the keys, then, and began to play something haunting and melancholy and that he had heard a thousand times in his life. The familiarity of it gave him something else to focus on, and he picked at the piano keys as the song formed around him.

'It's nine o'clock on a Saturday
The regular crowd shuffles in
There's an old man sitting next to me
Making love to his tonic and gin'

Then came the familiar touch of magic at the back of his neck, a slight distortion of the air, and Tony knew without a doubt that Loki was there, behind him and real. He didn't - couldn't - turn though, and his fingers wouldn't leave the keys. They were tapping away at a melody he couldn't be bothered to listen to as his mind started to swirl again, descending into the madness of his need. Because he needed Loki, needed the god to keep his own darkness at bay and to save him from the ever present nightmares. He needed Loki to hold him together, to touch him and see him, and he needed the god to need that of him - needed to touch and hold and see Loki too. He needed to kiss and bite and mark and caress and love Loki, and he needed to be loved in return. He needed Loki. He loved Loki.

So he told Loki that, a choked confession whispered to what should have been an empty room, at least according to SHIELD. "I love you", escaped his lips, and it was terrifying.

His confession was met with a sharp intake of air from the god behind him, and it sounded like Loki was coughing on it, as if the surprise had rendered him speechless - maybe it had, Tony couldn't look, wouldn't look. He didn't know, he just waited, because Loki's confession was supposed to come next. Loki had to love him too, after all, after everything, Loki loved him too. Why else would the god have kept coming back? Why else would he have come back at that moment? He had to love Tony, because Tony loved him and that was how it was supposed to work. There was a shuffling sound, a step taken forward by the god, moving towards Tony - or maybe away. But the response never came, no love was ever declared, Loki never spoke of how he felt or what he wanted. There was only silence from behind him, and Tony had to close his eyes against the pain of stinging tears. Of course, of course Loki didn't love him back; Loki didn't feel the same because only in a perfect world was love reciprocated like that, and Tony's world was far from perfect, never perfect, and it hurt.
It felt like hours before there was noise again, as Loki stepped forward until Tony could almost feel the heat of the god at his back. "You were playing a song", the god said, and Tony could feel that too, the vibrations of his voice that was rough with something heavy and dark. "Will you play it for me?"

Tony wanted to say no, or question why he should, but the answer was obvious and hanging in the air of the room. Tony would because he loved Loki irrevocably and unequivocally, and he would do anything for the god, no matter if his feelings were ever returned. It was pathetic and debasing - Tony was pathetic and debased - but if Loki asked him to play a song, then he would. He hated himself for that, for the desperation to please. He wanted to scream NO and strip the emotions from his very soul, until anything that could be love was torn away and cast out of him. He didn't want to feel, didn't want to hurt, but he did, and still he began to play as Loki had asked.

'Sing us a song, you're the Piano Man
Sing us a song tonight
Well we're all in the mood for a melody
And you've got us feeling alright'

He played the song, and the notes sounded out clearly from the piano even though his fingers trembled. He even sang too, voice rising and falling with the swell of music, pain and dreary hopelessness meeting in bitter melancholy to turn the song darker than it otherwise could have been. He poured his heart into the lyrics, every word a testament to what he felt and what he suffered, every line a statement of love in itself. And though his voice sounded strong, it was an artifice constructed to hold up the song, when really his throat was tight to breaking with what he couldn't just say, and what he hadn't received.

The song was too short, in Tony's opinion. As he finished the last chords, and they hung in the air, he wanted to stretch time onwards into infinity. Maybe, if he could make this one moment last forever, then Loki could love him, but for all that he was a genius, Tony Stark could not master time, and the silence came rushing back in. On the keys of the piano, Tony's hands shook even harder, and he had to pull them away lest they accidentally make a note ring out. He pressed them to his lap, nails digging into his legs to keep it all at bay, but it wasn't working at all, and Tony felt so stupid because why did he say that? He curled forward, drawing his body in, to hide, and he wondered why he would think that about Loki, or feel that, or why for the ever-loving fuck would he say that, but he did - he did and he couldn't take it back.

"I'm going back to Asgard tomorrow", Loki interrupted, and as much as Tony should have been grateful for that, he couldn't be. "I'm going back and they will punish me, but I will return to you". Tony choked, coughing on the sentiment, because Loki would be leaving, but he would come back - he said he would. "I swear to you", there was pleading in that voice, but Tony couldn't move, couldn't turn around. "I swear to you I will be back at the very first moment. Will you wait for me?" Yes yes, Tony wanted to shout, of course he would wait, if Loki asked him to. He would wait forever if that is what Loki wanted, but his throat was blocked by the pain of loss, and he couldn't scream or shout or speak or whisper. Instead, he nodded, the tears that were built up in his eyes threatened to spill, though they held out a moment longer.

But the nodding was answer enough for Loki, it seemed, as there was a ghost of breath against his ear, one last "Goodbye, my Anthony", before the god was gone. Tony held out for only a moment before he curled forward, tucking into himself and collapsing into sobs. Loki was gone, and Tony would wait, but right then - right then, he was shaking apart, and it took far more than he had to stay together.
Tony was hurting the next morning. He had fallen into unconsciousness atop the piano, not even the ringing of dissident chords enough to shake him, and when he woke, it was to pain - physical and emotional. Still, he forced himself to move, to leave the room and head back to his bedroom, avoiding the sight of his bed, where everything had fallen apart. He kept his head down, not paying attention to anything as he showered and dressed before stepping back out before the panoramic windows. Only then was the sun beginning to rise, and Tony watched it in exhausted silence, knowing that soon someone would come to tell him that Loki was gone, back to Asgard for whatever awaited him there.

It only took an hour, then the team was at his door, all of them but Thor at least. They watched him in weary silence as Steve told him how Loki had been taken in and sent back to his former home - not his real home, his real home was with Tony. Natasha's face was only blank throughout the exchange; Clint was both angry and pitying. Bruce seemed resigned, but with the scientist, it was hard to really tell. Steve was burying his own emotions behind the mask of a mission that needed completing, quoting back at Tony what would be expected of the man now. Tony didn't care, not really. There would be house arrest and probation, and his technology would be as limited as they could make it, but Pepper would explain that all later.
They asked him if he would cooperate, and he said yes. After all, he did like his teammates, and maybe, being Iron Man again would help to pass the time. With that agreed upon, no one lingered, and Tony was alone again.
Questions of Morality and Wanting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's going to be another late night for the Crown Prince. Despite how all these feasts and celebrations are supposed to be for him, and the fact that Thor isn't even King yet, there is still so much work to be done. Tonight, he has nearly double the amount too, as Loki had taken the entire day off from his duties, and so they all fell to Thor. It is all tedious work of management and logistics, and while Thor could very well handle it, he doesn't want to. He can't begrudge Loki the break, though, as he wants to see his brother happy, and it seems the best way to that is through rekindling the relationship he once had with Tony Stark. Thor smiles slightly to himself, because he had spotted the two coming back from their tour earlier, and the both of them had been grinning widely with pleasure and excitement. He is happy for them, he really is, but still, all the paperwork piled on his desk in the King's Study is kind of killing that joy. Maybe the two could spend their next date sorting through all the citizen petitions that have come in so that Thor doesn't have to, and he can finally get a full night's rest.

The door to the study swinging suddenly open, though, breaks through the rhythm of working that the Thunderer has established, and he rises and turns, expecting to see some fearful guard warning of an attack or plot. Instead, it's an irate Loki who stalks in, using his magic to slam and bar the door behind him. That makes Thor pause in confusion, because it's been quite some time since he has seen Loki looking so angry, especially at him, and Thor cannot recall having done anything particularly stupid that might invoke that wrath.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Loki demands in a growl, and he is invading Thor's personal space now, hands gripping the front of his sleep tunic tightly. Loki's hair is down, and it makes him look savage and wild as he scowls, rage flashing in his eyes. It would intimidate most, but Thor is not most, and he knows that if Loki really wished him harm, then he would never see it coming like this. So he places a hand on the other god's shoulder, trying in vain to calm him down.

"What is it I am supposed to have told you, brother?" Thor questions, and at the endearment of brother, Loki only stifles. It does nothing to soothe his ire, as Thor had hoped it would, and if anything, it seems to make Loki only that much more angry.

"Of Tony Stark's wife, brother!" Loki spits out that title like it is poison, which is something Thor has not heard in a long while, and he knows now just how serious this is - if the mention of Lady Veronica was not enough to indicate so. "He got married! Anthony got married and you didn't bother to tell me!" Thor feels vaguely grateful that this room is spelled against sound, so Loki's screeching will not bother any other residents of the castle. "What brother are you to keep something like this from me!"

But Thor doesn't rise to that obvious bait. Instead, he forces Loki to remove his hands from his shirt, then pushes the other god down onto the couch nearest his own desk. Loki hardly looks grateful for the manhandling, but he allows it, so Thor can't be bothered to care. He sighs, though, because speaking of Tony's short marriage will not be fun or pleasant, especially when Loki is already so angry. It's probably best, though, that he just starts at the beginning, speaking as plainly and as honestly as he can. "I did not keep it from you, for you never once asked me to speak of Tony".

"I never needed to ask because you were so happy to tell me of him", Loki hisses indignantly,
pushing forward as if he wants to strangle Thor, but the Thunder god ignores that.

"That was before your decision to hide away from him in Asgard". When Loki makes to protest again, Thor cuts him off with a sharp look that surprisingly works. "I saw how it hurt him when he realized that you did not intend to return, brother. I decided then that I would no longer play messenger boy between you two, as Tony was suffering for your choice, and you did not deserve to hear of him any longer". That shuts Loki up, and as the anger fades from his face, Thor feels a bit guilty. It's the truth, though, and Loki has made bad decisions in his past, which Thor will not flinch away from. He has learned how to deal with the consequences of his action, and so too must Loki.

"And the wedding itself? Was that not something worth sharing?" Loki asks. He is much quieter now, and subdued. It inspires Thor to reach out and place his hand against Loki's neck, cupping his jaw in the familiar gesture that they have shared for centuries.

"I did not think you would ever strive to be with Tony again", Thor admits. "You had paid no mind when I spoke of him to you before, and you did not ask of him after, so I thought you had merely discarded him".

"I would never', is Loki's protest, but Thor cuts him off.

"I know that now", he soothes. "I can see that you were merely distancing yourself from your own emotions, but at the time, I had no clue, as you would not speak to me of anything related to the mortal man". Loki looks away, but Thor's tone is not accusing, and he watches his brother earnestly. "And when I did finally see the truth, we were already planning this coronation and Tony had been invited. I thought then that the story would best be left for him to tell".

Loki smiles slightly, looking back to the Thunderer. "How very diplomatic of you, Thor".

Laughing at the light jibe, Thor finally sits back, hand falling away from Loki's neck as he knows that the worst of the drama has passed. "Indeed, Loki, I have learned from the very best". They laugh together, then, and it's comfortable like it wasn't for so long before. There is still a part of Thor that can't believe this - that he and Loki are on such good terms now - but they have both changed so much, and it makes Thor's days that much brighter to know that he has Loki to rely on and trust completely. They fall into mutual silence eventually, but Thor knows that if he wants to hear what has happened between his brother and Tony Stark, he needs to ask. Loki won't just open up on his own. "He has told you of Lady Veronica, then?" Thor inquires, and Loki nods.

"I asked him to tell me of her, and he did", the other god says wistfully, and there is pain in it, but also acceptance. "He told me most everything - how they met and fell in love, and what she has done for him. I am grateful for her, by the way". Loki adds on, looking to Thor. "She has done much to help him where I never could, and so I can't help to be at least thankful for her, even if I wish it was by my doing that he was happily wed". Loki says that as if he is trying to convince Thor that it is the truth - that he feels more than jealousy for a woman he has never met - but Thor does not need to be convinced.

"I understand", he says simply, reassurance to Loki, who is not nearly so petty as everyone else has accused him of being before. "She was good for him", he starts to say, but that isn't right, so he amends it. "They were good for each other". Thor can still remember the wedding, and how Tony had smiled and Veronica had laughed, and it had been a happy affair all around. It makes him smile a bit, and Loki mirrors it, though most certainly not for the same reasons. Then, though, something occurs to the god, and his smile is gone in an instant. "Did he also tell you of her death?"
Loki frowns at his brother's sudden seriousness, but doesn't question it. "Only that it occurred, but he did not wish to speak, and I wouldn't push him to".

Nodding, Thor looks away, thinking deeply before he speaks again. "Perhaps", he begins, "I might tell you of it then, as it is... something you should know". Loki doesn't reply, but he doesn't need to. Thor knows that his brother will listen to this, and that it is a tale he wants to hear, but will not ask for.

"It was two years ago, approximately", Thor states, and he is staring off into the wall across the room, the events playing out before his mind's eye. "Only a few months after Tony received the injury to his leg, and while he was still in recovery. He was forced by his knee to take a break from Iron Man, and as such he was dragged much more into the workings of his company, with Veronica a constant comfort at his side. As there was little Tony could do with the team, the two of them journeyed out to their Malibu home, taking residence there for the remainder of Tony's healing". Loki looked enraptured and pained by the story, and Thor could guess why. He knows that Malibu had been the home that he and Tony had shared for their short time together, and he knew that until Veronica lent her aid, Tony had trouble setting foot into that house as well. The memories and pain had often overwhelmed him there.

Thor continues without comment on that, though. "Pepper needed the help in California at the time, as the next Stark Expo was approaching, and there was a lot of work to do. They had also opened up the house to Jane, who was going to be presenting her research at the Expo, and it only made sense for their friend to stay with them". Thor's throat tightened around Jane's name, as if seeking to hold her inside - to hold her tight to his heart, or to hold the pain down, he couldn't say. "However, a new threat arose - a man calling himself the Mandarin, who made threats against the Expo and against Tony personally. Then the Mandarin's men attacked the security head of Stark Industries, Tony's friend Happy. In response, Tony was angry and threatened back, inviting an attack on himself".

What a foolish choice that had been, but Thor cannot fault or blame Tony for it, because he would have done much the same had someone attacked his friend. Besides, Tony has already beaten himself up enough over it.

"Unfortunately, the Mandarin jumped at this chance, and while Tony had done his best to send away both Veronica and Jane, they would have none of his foolishness, and both intended to stand at his side as his friend and wife should". Thor blinks away the tears gathering in his eyes, and he knows Loki could probably guess the rest of the tale, but he keeps talking because it is easier than thinking. "They brought in helicopters with missiles, and they bombed the Malibu house to pieces, sending it tumbling into the sea. Tony took to the skies in his suit, doing his best, but he was still injured seriously, and the fighting caused him great pain. The numbers were too great anyways, and when Tony was hit too, he fell spiralling into the sea".

"It was only through the intervention of JARVIS that Tony made it out alive at all, but Jane and Veronica were both lost to this world", Thor is truly crying now; he can hear it in the breaking of his own voice, and he feels it in the burn of tears down his face. "We do not even know how they died", he says with an unhappy laugh. "The rubble and the ocean did much too good a job of burying their bodies, and we never could recover them. Perhaps there were never even bodies to recover, and the women were both lost in an explosion. I prefer to think of it that way", Thor admits. "Much better to go so quickly instead of trapped in the rubble under the water, surrounded by water and darkness and pain - submerged in your own coffin". Thor chokes, voice cracking. "I do not wish to believe that is how Jane met her end; I do not wish to think she suffered".

Long arms wrap around Thor where he sits, and the god leans into his brother's body, taking comfort from the hug. He has never spoken of those events, or how they made him feel. He had been in
Asgard at the time, but Heimdall had told him that the Avengers were in need of help, and he had returned to them immediately. When he learned from Steve what had happened, he was distraught and so very angry. It had been he who destroyed the group behind the Mandarin's rule, AIM. He had ripped Aldrich Killian's head from his body, Extremis or no, and he had killed any warrior that sought to get in his way. AIM was an organization of fools who thought that their improvements made them a match for the gods.

The team had been displeased by this, but understanding still. Except Tony, who had helped him in locating and destroying AIM and Killian. Thor knows that it was not satisfactory for the man, however, as his injuries - new and old - kept him from killing Killian himself, but he had gifted that honor to Thor knowing it was the best revenge he would get. And Thor had not questioned that, lost in his own berserker's rage of grief and loss, just happy that someone could point him towards the targets and tell him who needed to die. The rage had left him hollow after that, though, and it was much the same with Tony. They had suffered through the funerals for their loved ones in silence, and then Thor had returned to Asgard, promising to come back for battle, but never again taking Midgard as his home.

Loki's presence is a comfort, though, and Thor feels better when the other god finally pulls away. There is some indiscernible sadness in Loki's eyes, and Thor belatedly remembers that Loki has experienced many losses of his own. It is only really now that Thor can understand that feeling, though.

"I had never realized", Loki says, and Thor knows he is speaking about Jane's death. Because while he had told everyone that she had died, he had never revealed the circumstances, and so many assumed it to just be a mortal affliction or accident.

"I will move on", Thor dismisses. He has nothing left to say on the matter, and would rather not dwell on something that still hurts. "I will move on for myself, and for my family, and my people". Loki nods slowly, eyes glinting with approval despite the sympathy and pain there.

"Spoken like a King", he says. "Maybe you will not be such a failure after all". The tease is just enough, and Thor finds it in himself to smile again at his brother, grateful for the love and care Loki has shown him since their reconciliation. Loki smiles back, and the Thunder god feels just a small bit lighter.

* * *

The story of Veronica Benning has given Loki much to think about. It weighs heavily on him, and while he doesn't like to think that someone else could make his Anthony happy, he has no choice but to deal with it. Anthony's hesitation now, though, makes much more sense to the god. It isn't just about their history, or the nature of Loki's own betrayal - the mortal carries so much guilt with him, both for his wife's death and for entertaining Loki's wishes now. It must feel like a traitorous move - to be courted when your wife has only passed a few years ago. Perhaps he fears the retribution of his team, as well, for the Avengers might not be any more accepting of their relationship now.

It's just all a mess, and Loki has to tangle and sort through it all if he wishes to be back at Anthony's side. At least now he better knows what has happened to Anthony in his absence, though, and that is some small comfort. Thor seems to have calmed down too, and he is now watching Loki with no evidence of his crying left. Loki sighs, not happy to be under such scrutiny, but he is in Thor's
private study, after all. Thinking it best to leave so that he could puzzle everything out in private and away from Thor's stare, he makes to stand. Before he can actually rise from his seat, however, Thor's feet are on his lap, and the other god is smiling a little wickedly at the disgusted look on Loki's face.

"Thor, you would do well to remove these offensive things from my lap before I remove them from your legs", Loki warns, only a little bit seriously. He doesn't know why Thor always feels the need to be such a child in his presence, but the Thunderer knows that his feet have to be quite disgusting after being on them all day, and in leather boots no less. But Thor only grins with more mischief as he stretches so that he can lift one foot to raise before Loki's face, toes wiggling. Loki smacks the nasty thing away, glaring sharply at his brother, but that hardly deters Thor, who does it again. This time, Loki lets a few sparks of magic play on his skin when he smack the Thunder god's foot, and Thor yelps at the sharp pain they cause. Loki doesn't bother to hide his mirth when Thor - the almost King of Asgard - goes toppling out of his chair and onto the floor. More than pleased with how Thor looks, sprawled across the floor and ass up - Loki laughs heartily, and though Thor complains as he rights himself, he is smiling as well.

Still, when Loki makes a move to leave, Thor stops him again - though this time with a hand to his arm. "Since you are here already", the blond begins, "I wish to speak with you about a rather important matter". Loki wants to roll his eyes, because he knows exactly what Thor wants to speak about, and of course the oaf would choose now to have a conversation on it. The trickster does stay, though, but he chooses to remain standing in the hopes that Thor won't drag this out all night. Taking this as the agreement it is, the Thunderer returns to his own chair, pausing before he turns back to Loki. "So... Dagan?" he inquires, and this time Loki does roll his eyes.

"Yes, Dagan. But you already knew that, Thor", the god dismisses impatiently. Apparently, that confirmation isn't enough.

"It has been quite some time since you have used your shape-shifting abilities so strenuously. Do you enjoy spying on Tony that much?" Thor might be grinning as he says that, but it is still a serious question.

"I never intended to be a spy", Loki defends vehemently. "I only sought to deliver that one parcel to Anthony, and I never even intended to leave behind a name or impression - just another faceless servant out of many".

Thor doesn't look quite convinced. "And yet you know that the Midgardians don't keep servants as we do, brother. They would not so easily dismiss someone who came to them as you did, and especially not someone who was helping them to dress". The blonde cocks an eyebrow, staring knowingly up at Loki, and it takes Loki no little effort to keep himself from reddening. How was he supposed to pass up the opportunity to see and touch the man he could only dream of for so long? Even if it did trigger some unwanted reactions in hormonal teenage body he had shifted into. That is one problem with shape-shifting over an illusion, you get all the flaws of being in that body, too.

"A miscalculation on my part, then, Thor", is the hissed response. Loki is finding this whole topic to be tedious and annoying, but still Thor doesn't seem satisfied. "But I did not intend for it to become a reoccurring theme".

"I can believe that", the blond god admits, leaning back in his chair. "But then what purpose does wearing the form of a young man serve? Do you seek to whisper words of encouragement into Tony's ear, or manipulate him as such?" Loki bristles at the accusations - even Thor would think so poorly of him that he must win love through tricks! But then a hand on his arm pulls that anger away. "Peace, Loki. I do not believe that to be the truth, but you have hurt him before, and I would assure it
doesn't happen again".

Sighing, Loki nods; he can't maintain his anger when Thor's suspicions are well-deserved. "I speak nothing of myself when I play the part of Dagan. I only enjoy the time when Anthony is not wary in my presence, and he speaks freely of himself. My actions have made that impossible to achieve in my own body".

"And no one would fault you for that, brother", Thor reassures. "I just hope you realize that there are risks; if Tony should find out that the child he has been entertaining all this time is really you..."

"Then it would be just another breach of trust", the trickster finishes, but he already knows that. He has been so careful, especially once Mother had seen him, but Frigga had given away nothing in a silent show of support. That did beg the question of how Thor had found out, though, when he hadn't even seen Anthony and Loki's teenage form together. "Did Mother tell you what I was doing?". Loki questions, though he finds that hard to believe. There was no reason for it, as Thor wouldn't dare to punish his brother for something rather minor, and Frigga hadn't seemed to wish Loki punished anyway.

Thor laughs, shaking his head. "No, she did not need to". The blond's eyes glint with fondness when he smiles up at Loki, and it's soft and more loving than Loki can normally stand. It makes his skin itch. "Did you really believe I would forget the nickname that Mother had gifted to you so long ago? Her Dagan, who was as the sunrise in a dark world", Thor speaks quietly, and Loki looks away. That Thor remembers something like this is both embarrassing and touching, but Loki supposes that Mother makes them both into sentimental fools. "I remember you going to her in tears many a time, only to be reassured that no matter what anyone else might say or think, she loved you, that you were her light and that soon everyone would see you shine".

Loki does flush this time, both angry and embarrassed by what Thor remembered of their childhood. "And of course you just had to spy on me in my weakness. More fodder for teasing?"

"No". Thor is frowning now, but at least he doesn't attempt to hug the trickster god. It would be unwelcome at he moment. "You were - are still - my brother. I was concerned when you cried, and I just wanted to make sure you were all right".

"That never stopped you from hurting me again the next time", Loki snaps.

"And I have apologised again and again for my thoughtlessness as a child", Thor says with a pout, barely suppressing his humor at all this, which only makes Loki that much more angry. "What must I do to earn your forgiveness, my most magnanimous brother?" To this, Loki won't answer, he has better things to do with his time than play these games with Thor. He turns to leave, intending fully to stalk out and leave Thor laughing behind him, but there is a weight on his feet and he can't move. Looking down, he sees that Thor has thrown himself prostrate upon the floor, arms wrapped tightly around Loki's legs, and staring up at the darker brother. "Please forgive me, oh most powerful Loki. I cannot live without your love".

Scowling, Loki tries to pull away, but Thor won't relinquish his grip. "Stop this, you overgrown fool of a child! I have other matters to attend to!"

"But Loki, please", Thor begs, eyes bright with laughter. "I need you to forgive me! I'll give you anything!" Loki only sighs, shaking his head and waiting for Thor to finish with his act. "I will give you the throne - the crown!"
"You just don't want to do all the work", Loki growls.

"Then you can have Mjolnir!"

"What would I do with your accursed hammer, Thor!" Loki's voice is getting louder, but still Thor won't give up, his amusement only becoming more obvious, and the blond grins brightly and mischievously.

"Would you forgive me if I helped to win back the heart of your mortal, brother?" Loki pauses at that, thinking it over for a brief moment, but then cursing himself for giving in to Thor's games. But the Thunder god has seen his chance, and he charges ahead. "I know how you might prove your love without any doubt, Loki, and while appealing to Tony's baser instincts too". Loki's curses Thor for choosing now to become crafty, and he curses himself for falling for it.

But still, he can't help but ask, "What is it you have in mind?" And Thor grins in victory, knowing he has finally beat his tricky brother, before standing.

"Why it is simple, my little brother", Thor teases, placing a hand on Loki's arm, which is eyed with suspicion. "All you need to do is prepare to fight". As Loki's eyes widen in realization, and he starts to protest against the idea that Thor is proposing, the hand on his arm tightens and pulls. Suddenly, Loki is slung over Thor's shoulder like a toy or a damsel, hair flying into his face, and an undignified squeak falls from his lips.

"Thor, put me down!" he yells, but the other god happily ignores him as they leave the room. After all, there is much to do and so little time to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Some more words from the artist:
"How does no one except Thor realize that the kid who keeps conveniently showing up to watch Tony takes his pants off is totally Loki? In fact, everyone in the palace should just assume that everyone is Loki, just to be on the safe side. "'h, yeah, that's just the prince pretending to be a shrubbery. He gets these moods sometimes'.".

(Commentary was taken from an email regarding Chapter 4, but saved until here to prevent spoilers)
Lesson 1: Alcohol helped to pass the time.

Tony discovered this before he even got off house arrest, when he was stuck in Malibu with only JARVIS, Stark Industries paperwork, and his minibar for company. There was nothing to occupy his brain - his lab was still locked down - and he could only tune up his car collection so many times before they were all perfect. There were even locks in JARVIS’s system, so he couldn't work on designs for the Iron Man suits, or access any of his works that were still in progress. The paperwork was hardly any distraction either, as Pepper screened it all before it was turned over to him, so he just needed to sign.

At first, he had thought to just ignore the paperwork, leaving it untouched, but that frustrated Pepper, who was his only consistent visitor, and she was also the only one who had even forgiven him a little. So he did the paperwork, and signed everything that Pepper asked, and each time she visited, she was sad, but at least the disappointment was gone. She had forgiven him the moment she saw Tony in person - the clever woman had known exactly what Tony had felt, and why he had done all of this, and she forgave him for it. Well, not entirely, but she was really only angry that she had to learn everything second-hand through Natasha, but he was eventually forgiven for that too. Pepper was one of the first normal things to come back into his life, and he was eternally grateful for the support her presence provided.

Even then, though, Pepper had a job to do, and it was harder because, while the public was left unaware at SHIELD's decision, Tony still wasn't able to go out and socialize. Pepper had to double her efforts to keep both Tony and Stark Industries in good standing while they were consistently missing opportunities to improve public relations. And, of course, because Tony was normally so public, everyone wanted to know where he had gone. Surely Pepper had come up with something to cover that, but Tony never turned the television on, so he didn't know what.

That meant, though, that Pepper could only stop in once a week if she was still in California, but she also had to travel often. There would be huge stretches of time where it was just Tony, and he couldn't stand the enforced solitude unless there was a bottle of something alcoholic in his hand. He drank heavily and passed the time by working his way steadily towards unconsciousness.

Lesson 2: Fighting took away the pain.

The first time he was allowed back in his suit, it was because SHIELD and the Avengers had no choice but to call him in. It had only been a year on house arrest, and Tony hadn't done anything particularly wrong in that time. Plus, Bruce and he were talking again, though they always were careful to avoid speaking of Loki. It was progress, and so when Hydra's latest creations began to rain down on Los Angeles, and there was no one with the technical skill to take them out, they called on Iron Man.

Tony didn't hesitate, jumping at the chance to get out of his house and into his suit. He headed straight to the battleground, JARVIS flashing up information on the screen as Tony readjusted to being the hero. When he was within range of the city, Captain America's voice came over his communications system, sounding off orders and warnings specifically for Tony. The man paid no
mind, letting JARVIS do the listening; Tony was too caught up in the rush of adrenaline that he hadn’t felt in so long, and it was glorious. He tore into Hydra’s machines, and he tore them all apart, and the destruction under his hands made his head stop thinking - neither of Loki or the passage of time, only what weapon to use next, and on what target. It was better than the alcohol, and it was better than the waiting.

Lesson 3: Ignoring the problem made it less real.

Three years into the wait and he was back at Stark Tower, living amongst the Avengers and with lab access again. Things weren’t entirely comfortable, and Tony felt like an outsider in his own Tower and on his own team. Steve was still distant, only really talking with Tony when they were fighting. Clint didn’t speak to him at all, and would only be in a room with Tony if there was someone else present to act as a buffer. Thor often had trouble looking Tony in the eye, and he never spoke of what was going on in Asgard, but at least he was able to genuinely smile around the genius, even if those smiles were few and far between. Only Bruce actively sought out Tony’s company or conversation, and they were back to being science buddies again, though that familiarity and comfort didn’t last long outside of the labs. And then there was Natasha, who was just as she had always been - that was comforting in itself, because she was the only one whose behavior hadn’t changed around Tony, even if it wasn’t friendly to begin with.

But they managed to be a team, somehow, and they fought together with ease. Tony could focus on those things - the fighting, the science, the team - and he didn’t think about why he always slept on a cot in the lab - because his bed was too big to sleep in alone - or why he only slept when his body couldn’t stay awake any longer - because otherwise the nightmares came, and no one was there to wake him up. He didn’t go back to Malibu at all, didn’t even speak of the house that had been his home with Loki and then his prison. He let the routine and the stress distract him, because then he could almost forget that he was still waiting at all.

Lesson 4: Concern made the problem worse.

It was six years in that he really had friends again. They never had really talked about it, or what had happened before, but the team seemed to have moved on, and Tony accepted that. It felt good to have people he could laugh with again, and he didn’t miss the tension that had pervaded the tower before. But now, though, the people he lived with actually cared about him, and it grated. They questioned his drinking; they questioned his aggression in battle; they questioned the way he had to live, and the way he dealt with the waiting. There were attempts made to help him ‘move on’. Dates were set up, but Tony ignored them. Alcohol was removed from the Tower, but Tony had his own secret stashes, and JARVIS couldn’t say where they were even with emergency overrides in effect. They tried to limit his part in battles, but that just made the other things worse, and at least if they let him fight, he didn’t drink so much. But each time a teammate showed concern, or tried to fix something, it only made Tony think, and that wasn’t a good thing.

It came to the breaking point when Clint finally sickened of the behavior, telling Tony to find a new piece of ass, because he was waiting for someone who would never come. Tony snapped, anger clouding his head as he screamed that there wasn’t anyone else to find - that he needed Loki NEEDED Loki because he loved Loki and of course Loki would be back, he had sworn it he had sworn it and he wouldn't go back on that because Tony was waiting and Loki would come back.

Thor had to intervene as both men only grew angrier, and Tony had ended up in his room with no memory of having got there, Bruce and Thor sitting on either side of him on the bed. There had been tears on his cheeks, and his body shook with sobs, but he didn’t remember crying.
Clint later apologized, and so did Tony, but no one questioned him on Loki or the waiting anymore. No one tried to stop him either.

* * *

It was just short of seven years in before the cycle broke.

It started with Thor heading back to Asgard, word having reached him of something dire happening in his home. He had gone immediately back, with wishes of luck and offers of help from his teammates, and he said he would send word if he needed it, but he would be back as soon as possible. Thor didn't come back immediately, though, or even within the month. He was gone so long that the team feared for his life, because surely there would have been something from the god, some message of sorts.

It was almost two years that Thor was gone in total, and all through that time the team worried, but they had no easy way to communicate with Asgard, and while Jane Foster was working on a way to travel, it wasn't even a prototype yet.

And then, like nothing had ever happened, Thor was back on the balcony of Stark Tower, smiling and laughing as the swirl of magic died down around him. The team had been down in the gym training, but they all clambered back up to the penthouse suite when JARVIS alerted them. The greetings and welcome back were enthusiastic all around, though a debrief would surely follow later. But at that moment, each member of the team let Thor swoop them up into hugs, just happy that the god had come back happy and in one piece. Even Natasha allowed a hug, though when Thor didn't immediately let go, she whispered something to him that had the god looking both sheepish and fearful, and he put her down.

Then there were questions flying around - what had kept the god so long? what was the problem in the first place? was he okay? was everyone else okay? Thor took these questions with grace, explaining that an attack had been made against Asgard, but it had been mostly settled when he had arrived home. There were no deaths and only a few serious injuries in the fighting, but his duties as a Prince had kept him for far longer than he had intended, and he had thoughtlessly forgot to send word that he wouldn't be coming back to Earth soon. Steve berated the god for that, but Thor bore it with grace and amusement, looking properly contrite for what he had done, and everyone else just looked on in amusement. Two years hadn't changed Thor at all - he was still earnest to a fault and maddeningly sincere. Even Steve couldn't summon up any real anger over the situation, and it was shrugged off as Thor just grinned again, announcing that it was good to be back.

But then Tony fucked up. "So, what's going on with Loki?"

The team was silent; this was the first time Tony had ever asked after the god, the first time he had ever willingly spoken about their enemy. But Tony was feeling good, and it had been two years of radio silence from Asgard, and he was okay; he was good, and he was still waiting. Still waiting after seven years, and Tony needed to know. Thor's smile faded, turning from bright to confused, and his brow furrowed. "What do you mean, Tony? He is here, is he not?"

Tony's tongue felt swollen in his mouth, blocking words that had no escape, but he forced them through somehow. "Why would he be here, Thor?"

"He was released to travel quite some time ago - nearly a year". Thor's mirth was gone, and the
whole room was too quiet for how full it was. No one was speaking, maybe not even breathing, except Thor, whose confusion was fading into grim seriousness. "He has been going on trips - leaving Asgard for weeks at a time. I had thought he was coming back here to visit, which is why I did not feel so compelled to send word".

"So he's been free?" Steve questioned, and Tony let him because his chest hurt, like the shrapnel was closing in, but his arc reactor was still there and still working, and he knew that wasn't it. He knew why his heart hurt, and it wasn't from his crimes.

"Yes", Thor answered, but he wasn't looking at Steve. He was staring down at Tony, whose eyes were locked onto the floor like it was an anchor for him. It wasn't hard to realize the truth, that Loki hadn't come back, had never come back, and Thor knew it as Tony did, and so the rest of the team were soon realizing. "I did not know", Thor said, seeking to explain. "I did not know he wasn't coming here, or I would have said something - done something. I didn't know, Tony, or I would have brought him here myself".

"It doesn't matter". Tony could only speak quietly, voice breathless as the air escaped his body. "It doesn't matter if you dragged him here. He didn't come back". The man moved away from the group, turning to leave in slow steps. Steve reached out to him, a hand landing on Tony's shoulder, but it was viciously shrugged away.

"Tony", the soldier tried, but the man cut him off with a scream.

"It doesn't matter", he cried out, eyes closed and fists curled tight at his side. "It doesn't matter because he's free now and he didn't come back! He swore that he would! That I needed to wait and he would be here, and I did, but he's a liar - he's a liar but I believed him anyway!" Tony's body curled forward as he threatened to break down and sob, but he kept them back with a hysterical laugh that ripped through his chest and throat. It was manic and wild, shaking all of Tony's body, and not even Natasha would try to approach him out of caution. "But he's free now, isn't he? He's free of Asgard - of his punishment - of his promises - of me!"

And Tony was still laughing when he left the room, and the team could only stare at each other in mounting concern and horror.

* * *

And so he fell.

There was no waiting anymore; there was nothing to wait for; there was nothing to look forward to.

There was no future.

Alcohol didn't help, but he drank it anyway. Fighting didn't help, but he was too drunk to fight. He couldn't ignore it; the pain was everywhere and everything.

He thought - but he tried not to - that maybe there was hope. Maybe Loki just had other stuff to take care of first, or something, but what did it matter.

If Loki never came, what did he have?
Alcohol and Iron Man - but he couldn't have both. And so Iron Man was out - Iron Man had cost
him Loki; if he wasn't Iron Man, Loki would have come back, would never have left in the first place.
But he and Loki drank together, so alcohol was okay; lots of alcohol was okay.

No absinthe, because it was green - green like a cape in the wind, or an undershirt on the bedroom
floor; green like eyes, piercing and glazed and laughing and panicked; it was too much green. No
scotch either, because he always had it when they drank, always loved the warmth of it in his
stomach when that voice would speak and he would listen. No scotch, because it tasted like
memories, and those hurt; everything hurt. But vodka was okay, or tequila, or even Everclear,
because they never touched that or any of those things, and that made them safe; safe to have, safe
to keep, Tony needed it to be safe.

He never felt safe anymore. Everything hurt and nothing was safe, it was never safe for him,
everyone lied. His dad lied - You were my greatest creation - his mom lied - I'll be home soon, Tony
- Obie lied - I'm only looking out for your best interests - Loki lied - I swear to you, I'll be back at the
very first moment. Everyone lied and everyone hurt and nothing was safe anymore. Not even the
alcohol was safe, but it made him feel that way, even if it was just a lie too. The alcohol felt safe, and
it made the darkness feel safe, so even when he couldn't see, he would drink because he needed it's
warmth when he could only feel cold.

Sometimes, he thought he heard Loki, but that was a lie. Sometimes, there was beeping or other
voices, but they were probably lies to. After all, he was falling, so it didn't make sense.

He was falling; there couldn't be people in the void.

He was falling; there was nothing here.

He was falling; nothing.

He was falling.

He was nothing.

* * *

It's after the third hospitalization for alcohol poisoning that the Avengers put their feet down. It
seemed like an extreme that they waited so long, and Tony wondered why they did, but then he
would remember that everyone lies, and he lies best of all, so they probably believed him when he
said he was going to finally clean up. But three hospital stays seemed to be enough evidence to the
contrary, and Tony got put in some kind of rehabilitation home, or something equally ridiculous and
pretentious. It's SHIELD owned and operated, which would have worried him if he could care, but
he only found that out as he was riding the coattails of his withdrawal, and it wasn't all that
important at the time. Maybe it was only worrying because enough agents needed rehab that they
had their own set-up for it.

They forced him into withdrawal, and they said it would help him, but it wouldn't because they're
lying - they're always lying, but they tried to act surprised when he called them out on it. He wasn't
stupid; he was a genius liar in a world of liars, and everyone just kept pretending that's not true.
Withdrawal hurt, though, and he screamed and begged and cried through it, and they kept saying
that it would get better but it didn't. It didn't for a long time until it did, but that didn't make them any
less of liars. Even liars had to tell the truth sometimes.

They wouldn't give him alcohol; they wouldn't give him what he needed, and so every night he spent falling until they gave him sleeping pills. They though he didn't notice because they're hidden in the food, but he did and just didn't say anything because a lie of omission was still a lie, and he was a liar. But he took them anyway because the falling stopped when he did, and he didn't like to fall - he didn't want to fall anymore, so he took the pills. It's still wasn't as good as the alcohol, not as safe because the pills weren't warm, and they didn't make everything fuzzy and safe, and he couldn't take the pills whenever he wanted. Someone else controlled the pills, and so Tony spent his days falling and his nights with the pills. It was like death, or how he imagined death to be. There was nothing at night, but it was a good nothing, a safe nothing. Not like the nothing of his days.

But then they gave him something one day - they gave him someone. He didn't learn her name at first, didn't remember it because he thought she was just another part of the nothing, like everyone else was nothing and he had nothing and his future was nothing. But she was something, and she went from nothing to something to Doctor Benning, and then she was Doctor Veronica, and then she was Doctor V. She talked and Tony listened because she could talk away the nothing; she talked of treatments and emotions and PTSD and depression. She talked of panic attacks and anxiety disorders and getting help and letting it out and letting it go. He told her that he had already let go, that he was falling always falling, and then she said that she would catch him, that his team would catch him, that Pepper and Rhodey and Happy and JARVIS would catch him and that the falling would stop, but only when he was ready to let it stop.

They sounded like lies, but Doctor V didn't lie, she didn't hide the truth or make it pretty, and she filled the nothing with her voice and her presence, and soon the nothing was gone. He had things again, and he had friends, and he had a future, and the nothing gave up and went away, and he didn't need the pills or the alcohol because he was safe, and Doctor V had made him safe, and he loved her for it, even though he didn't think he would ever love again. And she said that she would come back with him, and she did, and he loved her and she loved him back.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone cares, Veronica Benning is an actual character from the comics books, and probably the only romantic relationship that was healthy that Comic Tony had. At least, until he dumped her for a crazy mutant.
I did tweak her profession a bit, but I kept the whole Doctor/Patient meet-up and hook-up thing the same.
It's another night and another feast, and Tony sighs as he gets ready. He hasn't seen Loki all day, and it's bugging him because last night hadn't exactly gone well. What was the social protocol for crying all over your ex about your dead wife, especially when said ex was trying to get back in your pants? It was a fucking puzzle, that's what it was, and even after he had actively sought out Loki, he hadn't found him. No one in the whole palace could tell him where the second prince was.

Dagan had been missing, too, which had also disappointed Tony. At the very least, he had hoped that bonding with the kid might be a good distraction, but no luck their either. Eventually, Tony had just attached himself to Steve's side, bugging the super soldier with questions as he tried to sketch out the skyline of Asgard. Steve had put up with it - the man had never-ending patience - but he had kept making these little annoyed faces that amused Tony so much he couldn't stop.

Now, though, he's going to the feast in the hope that Loki is there. He just wants to reassure himself that the god is okay, and that they are okay - he isn't entirely sure what to make of Loki's reaction from the night before. He had been so calm and accepting of it all, but there was certainly some hurt too. Tony felt guilty about that, but he really shouldn't because he had waited, but it was Loki that had never come back, and so Tony had moved on instead of letting himself go insane. He frowns, remembering how close he had come to that before V and his friends had pulled him back down to Earth. It makes him want to shiver, remembering the thoughts that had spun through his own head, and how he had felt like he was always falling through a void.

A knock on the door interrupts his memories, for which Tony is grateful. He can already feel the prickling of cold sweat on the back of his neck, he wipes it away with a grimace before opening the door to a politely smiling Loki. Tony starts to smile back, but then his brain catches up, and he glares instead, as a polite Loki equals a Loki who has fucked something up or will fuck something up. The glare only makes Loki's smile a bit wider. "I was hoping you hadn't left yet, Anthony".

"Why?" the man asks with no little amount of suspicion.

"I wished to ask if you would attend the feast with me tonight", Loki states beatifically.

"Sure", Tony says with a shrug, stepping out of the room to Loki's side. He shuts the door behind him before looking up at the god. "Why not?"

* * *

"Prince Loki Odinson and Anthony Stark of Midgard!" The announcement by a servant is a first, and everyone is staring as Tony and Loki walk in, and Tony thinks, that's why not. Because of course there was some secret significance to showing up to the feast at Loki's side, and being announced, too. Loki's grin at his side says that his plan has succeeded, whatever that plan might have been. They were even early to the feast, with everyone just mingling before they took to their seats, but it also means that when they get to the head table, Loki is free to sit himself down right at Tony's side.

That is a signal of sorts, and everyone else begins shuffling to their seats as well, and all the
Avengers wander over wide-eyed. Loki's spot-stealing means that Bruce is booted around to the other side of the table, between Natasha and Steve, and Tony really wishes they would stop staring - except Natasha, who doesn't stare, just watches.

"When you said go to the feast 'with you'", he says, turning towards Loki and ignoring his teammates, "you meant with you with you". It isn't a question because of course that's what Loki meant, the tricky bastard. And that tricky bastard's smile just gets wider and wider, not denying a thing. Tony only huffs, turning back forward and glaring at each of his team until they all look away, finding something else to do with their eyes. Natasha smirks, though, winking before she turns to speak with Thor, and Tony fights down a smile.

* * *

The dinner progresses as normal, even with Loki sitting amongst them. It makes Tony suspicious because his teammates are bearing this all with rather good grace, and he bets they've been gossiping about him and Loki behind his back. It's annoying, but at least the meal isn't awkward. Well, not until the desert course at least. It's Tony's favorite part, as they have sweet fruits that are delicious, and some sort of cream pudding, too. It's served in big bowls along the table, and everyone helps themselves using the serving spoons to dish out as much as they want into their own bowl. It's not Tony's favorite out of everything they have served, but it's still absolutely yummy, so when he notices that Thor's getting ready to move on to seconds, he reaches to snatch up the spoon - he's not going to miss out on sweets just because Thor can pack away more food than a small herd of buffalo.

He never actually gets the spoon, though, and Tony startles a bit because it had been right there. Now, however, the spoon is in Loki's hand, and the god is smiling faintly, a bit of mischief in his eyes. Inexplicably, it makes a smile tug at Tony's lips too, and it's only when Natasha pointedly coughs that he realizes they've just been staring at each other like two loons across a bowl of alien fruit, and that everyone has been watching. Tony only just stops himself from face palming - why is he suddenly turning into a love-sick puppy? - but then Loki holds out a bowl full of pudding to him, and Tony blinks before taking it. He manages a surprised and mumbled thank you, taking the bowl, then watching Thor pout as he realizes that Loki has taken the rest of the desert for himself and Tony. The dejected look on Thor's face, plus the self-satisfied smirk on Loki's, make Tony laugh - first it's just to himself, but then he's laughing out loud and the rest of the table joins in. It's weird in how light-hearted and easy it all seems, like something from a team dinner at Stark Tower, but Loki's there too.

It's just weird.

* * *

When the dancing begins, Loki disappears. Frigga is missing too, and so it's a safe bet that he's escorting the Queen back to her rooms again, but Tony wants to pout because the god hadn't even said anything to him. He doesn't, though, because the team is still around and they'll all be able to guess why he's pouting like a put-out boyfriend, which he isn't. Thor starts up a conversation explaining some traditional death match or something, though, and Tony lets himself space out. He's
worried about Loki, after all.

The god has seemed okay, all tricky and troublesome like normal, but last night's conversation hadn't exactly been easy, and Tony just wants to double check. But they haven't really had a moment alone yet, and when Tony had tried to bring it up before they had reached the feast hall, the god had skillfully turned the conversation away. Still, the whole 'coming to the feast together' seemed to mean that Loki wasn't put off by Tony's widower status, which was good. Probably.

It's only when a hand comes down on his shoulder that he realizes the team - or Thor, more specifically - had been speaking to him. Stumbling out of his musings, he looks at all of them before speaking. "Sorry, He-Man, could you repeat that?"

Thor smiles, not at all offended by Tony's wandering mind. "I was merely asking if my brother had spoken to you about his joining the tournament".

"What tournament?" Tony asks with no little confusion, because no, Loki hadn't said a word about joining something.

"There is to be a fighting tournament starting tomorrow", Thor explains, "and I have heard from the organizers that Loki has joined at the last minute".

"Why would he tell me about that?" Tony frowns, not sure why he would be the one that Thor was asking.

"Well", Thor's grin turns sheepish, "I had thought he might dedicate the fight to you".

Tony's brain can't process that - it isn't working properly at the moment - so he demands, "Explain".

Thor does without complaint, thought the eye roll from Clint means that he's already done this once when Tony wasn't paying attention. "There is a three day fighting tournament leading up the coronation. It is one we have annually, anyway, but it is more widely attended because of the celebrations. The fighting is not to the death", Thor clarifies, and for which Tony is relieved to hear. "But each fighter chooses a sweetheart or lover to dedicate their fighting too, and the fight in that person's name. They often carry a token of the person on them as well - mostly a lock of hair or ribbon woven into a ring or through the grip of their weapon. Then, should that fighter win, they present their victory as a courtship gift to their sweetheart". Tony nods along, brain running a mile a minute about the fact that Loki is going to be fighting, but he hasn't said a word to Tony yet.

"It's almost like a public proposal", Steve clarifies, and if Tony was paying attention, he would have made a Captain Obvious joke, but he's still up in his head, running around in circles. Well used to this, the others all wander away, leaving Tony to think. And think he does.

There has to be some significance to Loki joining this traditional tournament meant for young lovers or whatever. Loki never does anything without a reason, and the most obvious one would be that he wants to impress someone, and the next most obvious conclusion is that he wants to impress Tony. Everything that has happened since the beginning of this trip had been Loki trying to earn Tony's forgiveness, and maybe his love too - Tony hasn't said yet that he never stopped loving - but if Loki was fighting in Tony's name, wouldn't he have asked for a token? That's what Thor said was supposed to happen, but it hadn't yet. That could mean that Loki was fighting for someone else, but if there was someone else, why was he trying to get back with Tony? Maybe for a bet, or did he just want a roll in the sack for old times' sake. Tony is driving himself up a wall with all of this, and the party atmosphere isn't helping the blooming pain in his temples, so he stalks out, hoping that Loki
misses him when he finally comes back, the fucker.

He ends up in the garden, as it is one tradition he just can't break. The air is cool now that the day is over, and it soothes some of his headache away. He takes to staring at the sky again, because the multitude of stars and planets and galaxies relaxes him, and he would rather plot out the vectors of their movement than think about Loki. The peace lasts for a while, but unfortunately, the night has other plans, as there are light footsteps coming closer along the garden path. Tony lets a breath escape as he shuts his eyes against the stars.

"Thor says you are entering the fight tomorrow", Tony says, not needing to see to know that it's Loki approaching him.

"Thor says many things", is Loki's cool reply, voice coming from just to Tony's left. "But very little is worth listening to".

"And you say quite a lot - most of it when you aren't speaking at all", Tony retorts, stretching along the bench but still not opening his eyes. Loki chuckles at the light tease, though it's only a quiet huff of sound. It's not even really that funny, but it's the truth, and that makes it of some amusement to the God of Lies.

"You know me so well, Anthony", he returns, tongue rolling through Tony's name like a lover's caress. It's nearly sinful to hear, and the engineer's heart stutters slightly at it, but Tony snorts through his nose instead, covering up his body's reaction.

"Not well enough, apparently". Only now does Tony sit up, blinking his eyes open to stare at Loki - it's harder than he likes to read the god in the dim lights of the garden, but not impossible. There is faint smile at the corner of Loki's lips and a crinkling around his eyes that speak to genuine pleasure, but Loki's standing back a few paces, keeping the space between them. Testing that distance, Tony stands, and moves in a slow turn around the god, spiralling closer as he speaks. "You didn't mention that you were going to fight. Got a sweetheart to impress?"

Loki's eyes track Tony's movements as far as they can, but it's a small show of trust that he doesn't turn his whole body, allowing Tony to move behind him. "Yes", he finally admits once Tony is back in his line of sight. "But I wasn't sure what they would feel of my wish to fight in their name".

"It's a great honor, though, isn't it?" Tony questions, watching the subtle twist of Loki's mouth as his voice drops lower, now in front of Loki and still pacing around. If Loki is aware of the slowly shrinking distance between them, he doesn't show it. "Anyone would be flattered by such a gift".

"The one I love isn't just anyone". It's almost a hiss, as if a great insult has been made against Loki. And maybe, to the god, that's exactly what it is. Still, Loki drops his eyes to the ground, head bowed forward in the manner of a confession. "And our courtship is not without trials". The last word hangs there heavily, a testament to all that Loki has done, and of all the pain he has caused Tony before.

"And now?" Tony comes to a stop before his god, standing within an arm's reach, and so close that he is forced to tilt his head back to catch the god's eye. Loki doesn't reply, though, only slowly staring at Tony as if that was answer enough in itself. There is a buzz of power in the air, flickering at the edges of Tony's senses, but he resists its desire to pull the two of them together, holding perfectly still even as Loki begins to melt under it. It's only when the air is rent by a shout from the dwindling feast that Loki comes back to himself, pulling back sharply with a shaky inhale.

"I still intend to fight, and to win". It's a subtle dodge of what Tony's question really is. There has
never been any doubt to the man that Loki would follow through on his decision to enter the tournament, but he wants to hear Loki say it, and say out loud who exactly he is fighting for. More importantly, he is asking what Loki expects from him in return - or what he wants from Tony, more accurately. The answer to that, though, is neither obvious nor immediately forthcoming, as Loki's gaze shifts away from Tony's, avoiding eye contact as he avoids the question. "A blessing for good luck, however, would be very welcome".

That's... unexpected. It's an admission from Loki, at least in part, and one that has probably cost the god some of his pride. Still, it's something to work with, but now Tony finds himself at a loss. His knowledge of tournament etiquette only includes what Thor had shared earlier, and that was really only a very generic overview of how things were traditionally done. There had been no script provided for a proper good luck, and there's something impersonal about a simple 'break a leg' like would be exchanged back on Earth - same with saying 'kill lots of people for me'. A stray thought manages to break through Tony's mounting panic, however, and he realizes that he can give Loki a token. Though what to give is also a challenging question - Tony's hair isn't long enough to cut a lock from, and he doesn't exactly wear ribbons - but the smooth rasp of metal on his skin answers that.

With a small smile that seems to puzzle Loki, Tony pushes back the long sleeves of his shirt, revealing the two metal bracelets of his Iron Man armor. He always wears them out of habit more than anything, and as a reminder to what he has created. It's easy to slip them off, but when he turns to hand them to Loki, the god is just staring on in confusion, making no move to take the cuffs. Sighing internally, he has to take Loki's wrists himself, moving without thought so that he doesn't hesitate or reveal his feelings through shaking hands. Loki's skin is just as cool and smooth as he remembers, and there is a steady pulsing under the skin that picks up as Tony's fingers move. He can't help but let his fingers play and drag across the god's pulse point, this being the first time he has reached out and touched the god since before their split, and unbidden, he thinks of how Loki was always especially sensitive at these spots, shuddering in pleasure as Tony's teeth brushed against the thin layer of flesh that protected his veins. If the way Loki's pulse is rapidly accelerating is any clue, then that hasn't changed at all, and it makes desire bloom in his chest, pulling at his heart. Tony wants to do that again; he wants to bring Loki to the brink of release then deny him - he wants to drive the god crazy with fleeting touches and a wicked tongue before pushing him fully past the edge. He wants to tear Loki apart in the name of pleasure, and he wants to see the powerful god laid low and panting beneath him, vulnerable in his ecstasy. Tony doesn't do any of this however, only chastely sliding the Iron Man cuffs onto Loki's wrists, then dropping two short kisses against the metal, though he might let his lips linger, a barely there caress against Loki's skin before he pulls away. It might be too much, and he'll probably regret that later, but it's worth it to hear Loki's breath hitch in a way that he has so desperately missed, even if he won't admit that himself. Tony contents himself with just smiling wickedly up at the god - his god, maybe; it would be nice to say that again. "Kick some ass for me".

Nodding, Loki steps back. "Thank you, Anthony". It's a whisper of sound, a sentiment that is almost lost as silence stretches to fill the space between them. Loki's eyes are lowered to the bands on his wrists, running his fingers over the well-preserved grooves of metal even as Tony watches. But the god makes no move to leave or continue their conversation, seeming to lose himself in thought, and as nothing else is immediately forthcoming, Tony feels that he should take his leave. After all, Loki's thoughts don't seem to be happy ones, in so much as it matters, and Tony is starting to feel that he has made some mistake in his actions. He knows that none of this has been easy on Loki - not that he finds Loki entirely blameless or forgiven, it's just an observation of the facts - and maybe that little bit of flirting was too presumptuous and forward.
"Ah... well, I should let you get some sleep. Big day tomorrow and all that", is his awkward attempt at a goodbye, fingers flexing in their grip on his cane.

Loki blinks, pulled away from his thoughts but still distracted. "Yes", he states softly, "Of course". For a moment, Tony thinks he is going to say more, a question or a thought lingering in the corner of the god's eyes, but it never comes. Instead, Tony turns, pulling away from the encounter which had started half-teasing before quickly turning awkward. He wonders, as he walks the now familiar path from the garden to his rooms, if maybe that's a sign that things won't ever be easy between them again, not that it ever was easy to begin with. But still, maybe, despite apparent regret and care on both side, it isn't meant to be.

* * *

The tournament starts far too early in the morning, at least in Tony's opinion. It's outside, in a huge ring, and there are bleachers raised all around, like a little coliseum of sorts. Tony and the rest of the Avengers get special seats in the Royal section, with Thor and his parents both there too. It's Odin who starts the fighting with some long-winded speech about honor and glory and other boring things. Tony's already bored by the time he has finished, and the fighting doesn't make things much better, especially once he realizes why everything is going to take three days.

The fights all take place one at a time, with two men - or women - facing each other down in the ring, and then fighting until someone yields. That's not so bad, except that gods are hard to beat, and even other gods have a tough time wearing a god down so that they'll give in. So even though there aren't many competitors, there is more than enough fighting to go around. It's not the most stimulating entertainment that Tony can think of, but he can't ditch out because Loki hasn't fought yet, and that's who he is supposedly there for. It's not easy to make conversation either, as the crowd is loud and noisy, and they often break out in cheers which are hard to speak over. Instead, Tony has to content himself with pretending that he has his suit and is fighting, imagining how he would blast all the other fighters away.

It isn't until sunset of the first day that Loki finally comes up, facing down a fighter who looks like tough shit, but is no match for the Prince at all. Loki blows the guy away - not with magic, as that is against the rules - driving the other fighter into the ground and beating his ass something fierce. Tony tries not to stare, but he does cheer when Loki wins, and he smiles when the god looks up and catches his eye.

* * *

Day two is the same, with lots of people fighting and only some of them winning. It's hot on this day, hotter than the day before, and Tony is especially miserable. He doesn't understand why they can't put up some canopies or something, but no one else is complaining, so he doesn't either. The only comfort comes in that Loki fights three times that day, and he wins each time. Tony cheers a lot that day.
The third and final day of the tournament finds Tony in his room, panicking. Thor had made an off-hand comment the night before about wearing Loki's colors, but Tony doesn't own anything green - he much prefers red. He's torn through every bag he has, and he's upended them all over the room, but a green outfit fails to magically manifest itself, and Tony is freaking out. He's been cheering for Loki and doing everything right so far, or as much as he knows, but he wasn't prepared for this. Plus, the tournament is already starting, and he can hear the cheering from his room. It's the last day, and there are only three fights to be had - the two semi-final matches, and then the championship bout. There's no doubt he's going to be late, and he doesn't know which fight is going to be Loki's. He's terrified it's the one going on right now, and that Loki has noticed Tony isn't there.

But then Tony's cane catches on the edge of something that's sticking out from under his bed, and he falls on his face. Belatedly, he realizes that it's the fancy Asgardian outfit he had worn to the first feast. Thor's voice sounds in his head like a bad television voice-over, and he remembers that the runes marked him as Loki's somehow. Maybe this will be enough, or at least he hopes it is, and through some miracle, he actually manages to get it on by himself. Then he's scrambling out of the room and down to the tournament grounds.

He's missed the first two fights entirely.

Bruce explains that they had both been rather short, less than ten minutes each, and Tony wants to smack himself in the face. He hopes to whatever deity is listening that Loki didn't notice he was missing, but then he sees the god sitting off to the side of the ring, head down. His whole posture screams dejection, and Tony feels guilt bubbling up in his chest. He had been trying to do everything right, but he had already fucked up on the most important day of the tourney, and he had probably disappointed Loki, too.

Tony sighs, settling back against the railing and not even bothering to grab a seat. One of his hands scrubs at his eyes, and he nearly misses the call for the final fight to begin, even though Odin is only sitting a few chairs away. He does catch on, though, and he looks up just as the first fighter enters the ring, and Tony remembers this guy. He doesn't know the warrior's name - had never bothered to remember it from the announcements - but the guy is nearly seven feet of lean, dangerous looking muscle. The other fights the warrior had been in had ended rather quickly, with him just beating them into the ground with a broadsword in hand. It almost hadn't been fair to his opponents, because the guy's unnaturally long reach and strength meant he could easily wield it one handed, and it made his broadsword twice as deadly.

And that actually worries Tony, because the way that guy is eyeing up Loki doesn't look good. The warrior looks distinctly unpleasant, and he's sneering at the Prince as they both take their places in the center of the ring. Tony fights the urge to gulp, because it doesn't seem outside the realm of possibility that Loki will lose. He's smaller and only marginally faster, armed just with knives - even if Loki is smarter, and Tony doesn't doubt that at all, this is still going to be a hell of a fight, and it's going to be hard for Loki to win.

Then the two combatants are moving, and they both head straight in. Loki is vicious, growling and using his knives with breathtaking efficiency to block or parry blows from the broadsword, but the hits are heavy. Each strike pushes Loki back in the dirt, and yet the god keeps rushing back in, though his blows are doing little. The other fighter only looks a bit scuffed up, but Loki is panting harshly already. It doesn't bode well for his stamina or endurance in this fight.
At some point, Loki loses both his knives, and Tony feels his stomach drop. The weapons are all dulled, but even a hit with a blunted broadsword can kill, and the other guy isn't backing down at all. Then a swing comes down, and even Tony can see that Loki won't get away from it. He doesn't have the time to dodge, and he has no weapon to parry with, and there is a large sword coming down right on his head in what is certainly going to be a killing blow. Tony can't help that he jerks forward, screaming out Loki's name along with the rest of the royal box.

But somehow, Loki catches the blow with his wrists, and a sharp flare of reflected light makes him realize why. Loki's wearing the Iron Man bracelets. Tony laughs in relief and amusement, because he hadn't thought to look for them on the god; he had even forgotten that he had given them up, but they are made with vibranium and more than strong enough to hold up to a broadsword, though Loki's arms don't look nearly so strong. But even as the god is holding back the heavy sword, his eyes dance up to the spot where Tony is standing, and their eyes meet for the first time that day. Tony can't help but to grin, still laughing, and Loki mirrors it, a smile spreading across his face, though it turns savage once he refocuses on the fight.

After that, Loki's vigour is renewed, and he beats back the other fighter, though each blow is hard won. Loki still takes hits, including a huge cut down his chest that is bleeding, along with a dozen smaller cuts along his body. But Loki turns it around, and he wins, and Tony cheers so loudly that his throat hurts. Then there is the presentation of the victory, and a gate is opened in the side of the ring so that Loki can head straight for Tony. Tony steps forward, too, standing at the front of the platform and waiting.

Loki victorious is a glorious god indeed.

The whole of him makes a striking picture under the afternoon sun, and Tony cannot look away even if he should want to. But why would he ever want that, when the god of his fantasies has begun stalking up the small set of stairs towards him, eyes only on Tony. And Tony's eyes are just as locked onto Loki.

Loki, who is clad in what has proven to be the standard fighting gear - only a pair of leather trousers - but Loki's are of a deep green and fitted to him like a second skin. Above this, he wears nothing, and where the pants end at his knees, he wears nothing below. It's a contrast with everyday Loki, who is beautiful even as he is covered from neck to feet in clothing, but this Loki seems all the more vicious for his state of undress. Tony watches - can't help but watch - the creamy pale skin flex and move with each rolling step, the flesh dipping beneath emerald fabric.

Everything about Loki, now though, is at contrast with his cool skin. Black hair is pulled back again in a high pony tail, but some of it has escaped to cling to his brow and curl at his cheekbones. Blood looks ruby red against his chest from the many small and large cuts he has earned, and the smudges of golden dirt stain his arms and feet. The only color that is wholly Loki now is in the green of his eyes and the flush at his cheeks from the exertions of battle.

The exertions which have given him a sheen of sweat and left the god panting even as he moves with grace. The fight has left the muscles of Loki's body clenching and twisting with lingering tension, and they play under the skin and the light of the sun. Sweat beads and rolls down along the defined curves of lithe arms, just as blood follows the parallel paths of abdominal muscles. The entirety of Loki is a constantly moving, seething body of muscle, a living entity of chaos and power clothed in the god's own beauty, and Tony is enthralled and distinctly aroused. He can feel every pulse of blood through his body, every beat of his own heart, hyperaware of himself and the god before him, but blind to the world.
It seems like the moment lasts for an eternity, but finally Loki is there in front of Tony, right there within easy reach, and Tony can't stop smiling because Loki won't stop smiling. Loki is drinking in the sight of Tony, it seems, and a pale hand, knuckles bloodied, reaches out to run a finger along the front of Tony's jacket, lightly tracing the runes there. It only makes Loki smile just a bit wider, and Tony is stricken because this is the first time he can ever recall seeing Loki so irrevocably happy. There's no hesitation or doubt to his smile, no scheme lurking in his eyes, and Tony distantly remembers his wedding day, and the smile on V's face. Both of these people he loves are so very different, but he recognizes that happiness all the same, and he smiles back, his throat tight because it hurts to be so happy.

This is what they could have been - what they should have been - the first time around. If the world hadn't conspired against them, if things hadn't gone so drastically wrong, this could have been their lives from the very beginning. There isn't some obsessive need pushing them together anymore, and it's not about escaping from nightmares or reality or both. It's just the two of them, together because they want to be and happy because they deserve to be. So when Loki kneels, holding out his knives as a gift for Tony's love, he accepts them with a laugh that Loki joins. They both ignore Odin or Thor or whoever is speaking, smiling at each other because somehow, it feels like a new beginning.
After the tournament's end, there is no ceremony or event to attend, so when Loki takes Tony's arm, he doesn't protest. He doesn't know where they are going, or even if he cares, because the high of their shared moment hasn't worn off yet, and they're getting stares from the lunatic grins on both of their faces. Besides, the coronation is the next evening, and everyone else is too busy to really bug them.

They end up in the garden, with Loki still shirtless and bloody, and Tony still in the Asgardian outfit. It has to be a strange sight to see such opposites sitting together on a bench in the middle of a garden, but no one walks by so no one can judge. It's all hazy, really, and they talk about everything and nothing. They don't make plans or declare their love, but they talk about the Bifrost and the other realms; they talk about new things Tony wants to work on for Stark Industries, and Loki points out flaws or ways of doing things better. It's comfortable, with Tony as animated as ever, hands moving wildly as he describes another project he wants to start, and Loki laughing because he can and because he's enjoying himself.

Slowly, over the course of the entire afternoon, they draw closer together, and the physical barrier between them is fading. Loki doesn't hesitate to adjust Tony's hands when trying to explain the internal structures of the Tesseract. Tony doesn't think twice about wiping away some of the dirt from Loki's cheek. Somewhere in the middle, their legs meet, pressing together from ankle to thigh, and neither of them notice at all. Loki's hand falls to the small of Tony's back as they speak, the god leaning forward in excitement as he listens to Tony talk about the suits new neural interface. Tony absently plays with the curls of Loki's hair as the trickster describes teaching Thor diplomacy through practical jokes.

It's only natural how they lean closer together in eagerness and excitement, speaking emphatically to each other and not even seeming to realize their proximity. But then Tony looks up at just the right moment, and Loki's face is suddenly in front of his. It makes the breath catch in his throat, and his heart stutters for a moment before it begins to pound, but he can't look away when Loki is staring back just as avidly. There are hands on Tony's hips, and he doesn't remember when they got there, but his own are curled around Loki's back and he doesn't remember that either. But the lips meet his and he can't remember why he was bothered in the first place.

The kiss isn't gentle or innocent - they are both too eager for that, but it isn't quite what Tony remembers kissing Loki to be like. There's no violence or desperation in the kiss, and no one is dominating the other. It's equal parts give and take, a chance to explore that neither will turn down. Loki tastes of blood and mint and something that sends a shiver down his spine, but that might just be from the god pulling him closer until their chests are pressed together as much as they can be, and Tony is locked in a vice-like grip that he doesn't want to escape from. Instead, he wraps his fingers into the dark locks of Loki's hair, and he pulls just a bit, just to hear Loki moan.

It works gloriously well, and the noise Loki makes against Tony's lips. He chases it with his tongue, pulling on Loki's hair again as he pushes into the god. Obligingly, Loki leans back, laying across the bench with Tony atop him, and Tony can feel the heat of Loki's skin even through his outfit. As he moves to straddle the god, however, he pulls back, hissing in pain. His knee hurts fiercely, not at all happy to be lifted or bent in the manner that Tony had wanted, and Loki immediately sits up, bringing Tony with him.

There's a green glow to the god's hand when he brings it to the man's knee, and suddenly the lust is gone and the kiss means nothing because Tony panics, and he shoves the god's arm away. That was
magic, and he didn't want magic, because magic meant thinking about the future, about whether Loki could or would come back with him, and what did they even have right now? It's a flood of doubts, and Loki's staring at him with hurt in his eyes, but Tony can't help but panic when he has so many questions and not enough answers. They had hopped straight into the make-out session without stopping to talk about the important things first, and Tony's heart is pounding for all the wrong reasons now.

He feels bad, he really does, because it had been happy and fun, but healing means commitment, and that's a lot to ask of Tony in one day. And he knows that Loki is hurt, and he must feel rather shitty because Tony certainly does, so he doesn't meet the god's eyes even as he climbs from his lap, a sorry slipping through his lips. He grabs his cane immediately, and he can't look up because Loki is standing too, a hand reaching towards him, but the god doesn't say anything and Tony doesn't know what that means. Instead, he just apologizes again before limping away. He's freaked out and guilty, and when he gets back to his room, it's all he can do to get undressed before he climbs into bed and sleeps.
The coronation of Thor Odinson, soon to be King of Asgard, is only an hour away, and the palace is aflutter with activity. Servants run back and forth, getting everything ready; guests are arriving, gathering in the great hall. There are foreign dignitaries and Aesir both in the mix, but still a few people are missing. None of the royal family is present, and none Midgardian have shown up yet either. That's a curious development, but Amora pays it no heed. She has a crown prince to find, because why not make it both a coronation and a wedding - with her as the Queen and bride of course. She had a new spell that even the Liesmith would be hard pressed to counter, and she's more than sure that Prince Thor will fall under it quite easily.

That's when - perfectly on time - Skurge makes his presence known in the hall, and the attack begins. Amora laughs to herself as the cacophony of screams, weapons clashing, and alarms mask her passage. It will be easy, she's sure.

* * *

Tony's sitting in the library when shit hits the godly fan. He's hiding there actually, because even though the coronation is supposed to be starting soon, he can't find it in himself to actually go. Oh, he will eventually, but if he gets there too early, than there is time for Loki to talk to him, and Tony isn't ready. He doesn't know how to explain his freak out to the god, because Loki hadn't actually done anything wrong. Sure, the trickster should have asked before bringing out the magic fingers, but he had only been trying to help, Tony is certain. Maybe Loki hadn't even been trying to heal him, just ease the pain, and yet Tony had still flipped out, acting like a complete idiot and cock-blocking himself.

Dagan's sitting with him too, though the kid hasn't said a word since he had shown up. Tony wasn't sure if he appreciated the company, but this was going to be his last full day on Asgard, and he wasn't going to scare the kid off. Besides, Dagan had looked so timid, like he had expected to be turned away, and that just made Tony want to help out even more. He had pulled out a chair and gestured for the kid to join him, but they hadn't exchanged any words. Tony wasn't even reading, hadn't bothered to grab any books.

But that doesn't matter because these obnoxious sirens go off, and Dagan's eyes go wide as he turns to Tony. "It's an attack", the kid says in a quiet voice, and Tony is immediately on his feet, heading out with Dagan on his heels. Neither of them have a set destination in mind, or know anything about the attack, but Tony knows that if he can get to his suit, he can turn it onto autopilot, and JARVIS can join the fray. He sets off in the direction of his room, contemplating whether or not he should ignore his leg and just start running, but Dagan grabs his arm. "We shouldn't go that way".

Tony looks down at the kid, but he's staring straight ahead. Another scream rings down the hall, though, and they really don't have time to take any detours. His rooms are just up around the corner, and they need his suit. "Dagan, you need to find someplace safe, alright?" Tony asks. He's not going to force the kid along, though he doesn't want to send him off on his own either. There are no good options either way, but Dagan can't hold him back like this. Before Dagan can protest - and he's going to, Tony can see it in his face - there's the sound of someone falling, and a body slumps over up ahead. Tony takes off running, cane forgotten on the ground, not knowing what could take out one of the palace guards like that, but he hopes the guy isn't dead. Dagan stays just a step behind
Turning towards his rooms, though, Tony comes face to face with a cackling Amora, and his stomach drops right out of his chest. She's got her hand going through some poor guy's chest, and when she rips it out, the guard slumps over dead. The Enchantress immediately notices the two newcomers to her slaughter-fest, eyeing up both Dagan and Tony before her eyes turn positively gleeful. She isn't focused on Tony, though, but Dagan, and even as he tries to put his body between her and the kid, she moves.

Tony takes a hard hit to the side by some invisible force, and he is sent sprawling across the unforgiving marble floor. He bangs his knee hard, and it drags a cry from his throat, but he's otherwise unharmed. It's Dagan, though, that he's worried about, and as he scrambles up, he realizes that Amora's kneeling before the teenage boy, whose on his knees on the ground. She's got one hand on his forehead, forcing the kid to meet her eyes, and Tony sees magical bonds holding the kid in place. Tony hopes to hell that Amora isn't pulling any of her glamour bullshit, because she's speaking softly to the kid, but from Dagan's scowl, that isn't it. For a brief moment, Tony just wants to get to his feet and charge, but he knows that won't work, not on Amora and when he has no weapons. But the hit she dealt him as landed him right in front of the doors to his room, and so he slowly scoots back across the floor, sighing when he reaches the door and it opens without a sound.

He slips inside, praying to anything that for the short minute it will take to get suited up, Dagan will be okay.

* * *

The bonds around his arms and legs, though magical in nature, chafe at Loki's skin. He growls, because Amora has surely done that on purpose, and because he wants to get to Anthony and make sure the mortal is okay. He wishes the man had listened when Loki had warned him from this area, having sensed Amora's magic at play. But no, Tony is still a heroic idiot, and so he ran right towards the danger when they should have been heading away. Now Loki is trapped by magic he can't easily combat, and Tony is somewhere on the floor, but Loki can't even search for him because Amora's hideous face fills his vision.

"Not your usual form, Loki, how odd", she croons, and Loki would spit in her face if he thought it would help. Actually, he does it anyway because he can, and he grins viciously when she recoils. It's not enough though, and before Loki's hasty searching can find Anthony, Amora is far too close to him again. "You snivelling, disgusting creature", she growls, "You think wearing the shape of a child will spare you?"

Loki has a mocking retort on the tip of his tongue, but before he can open his mouth, Amora smirks. That quiets him because while Amora is not nearly so clever as he is, she isn't completely stupid either. "But this form isn't for me, is it? It's for your dearly beloved, long lost Man of Iron". Loki's heart shudders to a stop because how can Amora have known that. How can this thrice-cursed bitch have known about Anthony when she has been banished to some backwater hellhole! Loki tries to pull on the bonds, tries to fight against the magic, but his own powers are always sluggish to respond when in another form, and he can't shift while he is bound like this. "A pity", Amora continues, "He seems to have abandoned you", and that makes Loki relax because if Anthony is gone than he is safe from Amora, and that's good. "Does he know that it's you under that child's mask, Loki?"
Of course Anthony doesn’t know, and Loki is sure that Amora knows that, but she always has enjoyed taunting her opponents at every given opportunity, no matter how foolish a mistake that might be. "Perhaps I should tell him, how would he feel about that, do you think? Would he be surprised at another lie from the Liesmith, or have you already broken him enough that one more crack couldn’t hurt?" Amora's grip tightens in Loki's hair for a moment, and he has to bite back a whimper. "Maybe I should make it a point to turn his favor away from you, as you have always turned Thor from me!"

It's always so pathetic how Amora's plots revolve around winning over Thor, or so Loki thinks. She never had a chance to win the Thunder god over even without Loki's interference, and yet it's always the same motivation. She's a terrible villain, really, but so are most all of them. And her threats are meaningless, because if Amora goes running off after Anthony now, then she'll miss her opportunity for Thor, assuming she could even make it more than a few steps before someone laid her low. Loki would like to be that someone, but he can't as long as the magical bonds hold. However, he would gladly pass on the opportunity to destroy Amora in favor of making sure Anthony is safe.

The clunk of metal on stone dispels any illusions Loki has of his mortal's safety, however, and the whir of servos only confirms it. Loki doesn't need to look to know that Iron Man stands in the doorway to Anthony's rooms, or that Amora now has a toy to play with. He curses Anthony for being such a fool, and he curses himself for loving the fool anyway. It isn't a surprise when a robotic voice rings through the corridor.

"Let the kid go, you magical bitch".

* * *

Amora is pleased and Loki hates it.

"So, despite your age, you would think to play with the gods? Do you fancy yourself immortal?" Amora taunts, and Loki can easily picture the smirk hiding behind Iron Man's face plate.

"I don't need to be immortal to kick your ass, sweetheart", Anthony shoots right back, and Loki could both kiss and smack him for the jibes. "Did your job of turning tricks on street-corners get a little too mundane?"

As always, Amora is easy to anger, and she lashes out immediately with a cry of 'Fool!' and a blast of magic. Iron Man easily takes to the air and dodges, hovering above both their heads. "I said you should let the kid go, Enchantress". Oh oblivious Anthony, he's looking after Loki now, though he needs no protection. Amora isn’t really after him, and knows better than to tangle with his magic in a fair fight. But then Loki notices that Iron Man's legwork is a little off as he dances around Amora's blasts. And if Loki could see it, then so could Amora, and if her smirk is any indication, she has. A crafty bit of spell work on the witch's part has a shadow sneaking up the wall behind Iron Man, and while Loki tries to shout out a warning, he's cut off by a strong kick from Amora's heeled foot. He coughs as the air violently escapes his lungs, choking on the words he was going to call out, but Anthony is down before he gets his voice back.

Amora is laughing - cackling really - and Tony is fighting the shadow, but it's wrapped around his bad leg and yanking him back and forth. If the pain is as bad as Loki fears it to be, the man must barely be hanging on to consciousness, and he growls. That only makes Amora laugh harder.
"Do you wish for me to leave him alone, little Loki?" Of course it doesn't matter what Loki answers, she isn't going to stop, but he's distracted when he sees Iron Man's mask turn towards him. Anthony has heard, and he's clever enough to know what that means. "Oh yes, Tony Stark", Amora goes on. "This little pet who I'm sure has been trailing you around - well, he's our dear little Liesmith all dressed up in a different skin!" The witch sound positively gleeful, and Loki wishes he could see Anthony's face. Is there disgust there? Shock? Anger? Whatever it is, he can't imagine it's good.

"Well, can't say that's a surprise", and Anthony's proving Loki wrong one more time. It makes him want to laugh in relief, because of course, after everything, Anthony wouldn't care, especially not if that was what Amora wanted. "I mean, I did think the kid looked a bit familiar". There's a smile in the mortal's voice, and nonchalance, and Loki can't help but smile too. His mortal is still astounding and breathtaking and a complete idiot, but the mortal is his.

Amora doesn't take this so well, though, her rage only spiking as she realizes that she is the butt of this joke. A sharp jerk of her hand sends Anthony flying, and she appears in front of him to catch the hero by his throat. Iron Man brings a hand up to her wrist, but stills when she squeezes his throat in warning, the metal there creaking dangerously. Loki's smile falls away, and he calls out with a millennia of power behind him. "Amora". It's a warning, but the witch pays it no heed as she holds Anthony in one hand and gathers power in the other. She makes the metal around the mortal's face fall away, the helmet fading to dust and revealing Anthony, who is glaring sharply.

"What a lovely face, no wonder the Liesmith enjoys you, pet. And an equally lovely jewel in your chest", Amora says with a sneer to Anthony, fingers slipping over the cover of the arc reactor in a hateful caress that makes Loki want to growl. Anthony flinches away, but there's nowhere to go when his feet can't touch the ground. "You should be more careful about displaying it, though", Amora continues, "someone might mistake it for a target". On the last word, her voice drops into a savage hiss, and Loki watches in horror as the witch throws Anthony across the room, a lance of magic following closely behind the mortal's body. Anthony is slammed against the wall, and Amora's magic immediately follows, taking the shape of a spear to embed itself in the mortal. Loki hears the sickening crunch as the metal lance pushes through and shatters the arc reactor, driving completely through Anthony's body and into the wall behind him, pinning him there. Anthony is screaming, eyes thrown wide and unseeing in pain, but the sound of his voice is lost to the blood that bubbles up from his damaged chest, coursing up and out of the man's lips in a pulsing stream of crimson.

Everything inside Loki cries out in terror, and he shrieks at Amora, who only laughs at the vicious mural of blood spread across Asgard's walls. He can feel the bonds of her magic on his skin, holding him tightly in place to watch as Anthony bleeds before him. His lover - his mortal - his Anthony is dying, and Loki screams, straining to reach him, to reach his magic so he might strike Amora down or heal Anthony. He pulls and pulls until something gives, and then he launches himself upwards and back into his own form, bringing his rage with him.
The last of our great artist's words:
"Being a true shapeshifter certainly has it's drawbacks. I look forward to him explaining that the reason for his absences was that he kept having to run away to jerk off. Tony would probably be out-of-control flattered, but everyone else... He should just tell them he's had an evilness relapse. "I was in my room. You know, plotting, scheming, doing dark dirty deeds... I DO WHAT I WANT, OKAY?!"

Also, fun fact:
Almost every single email from our great artist has some variation of the phrase "Why the fucking hell did Loki wait twenty years?", often times in italics for emphasis.

Amora is staring at him in something like shock or terror, but Loki doesn't care. He's back in his own skin again, and his magic welcomes it, pulsing through his body in tempo with his anger. He wants to look at Anthony, but he can't because he needs to tear down Amora first, and he lets that consume him. It's like back in the dungeons, with Frigga fallen and the Chitauri before him - the fear goes, the love goes, and only the anger is left behind. He embraces that again, letting his power pour out into the form of his favorite spear, and he lunges.

The fight isn't like any other. Amora and Loki might wield magic, but they were both also raised as warriors, and they blend the two things seamlessly. Loki moves impossibly fast because his magic releases in concentrated bursts of energy from his feet, propelling him forward. Amora can spin out of the way, though, because the lances of energy she fires from her hands work in much the same way, and she knows how to use the recoil to her advantage. It makes them both faster than any normal warrior can keep up with, but puts them on even ground. Loki brings his spear swinging down, but Amora changes direction with another energy blast, and Loki lunges into air. As her counter-attack comes down, though, he jumps, and then his image splits into a dozen Loki's, and they each attack. They can't truly land a blow, unfortunately, as Amora's own magic disrupts that of the clones, but they do confuse her, and Loki lands a few lighter strikes while she dodges attacks from other angles.

Finally, she sees through the game and lets loose a wave of magic in every direction. It is certainly exhausting, but it sends Loki skidding backwards, and his clones vanish. But that's perfectly alright, because Amora has been using magic all day, and she was never that powerful to begin with. Loki is relatively fresh, and he has much more natural ability than her. Amora lashes out, sending a more powerful blast at Loki, and he deflects it, but then falls to his knee. His foot has slid across a slick surface, and he realizes with a start that it is blood. As he parries another attack, he looks and knows that it is Anthony's. His heart constricts in his chest, because the mortal is right behind him and still dying, and he can't just dodge now because then Amora's next attack will hit the man. But this close, he can hear the fading flutters of Anthony's breath, and he knows that he can't fight much longer. Anthony needs him.
So, once again, he calls his magic to the balls of his feet, careful to keep Amora from noticing by directing blasts from the tip of his spear. The bitch looks confident, knowing that Loki can't move to the side for fear of exposing Anthony, and she's moving in for what she believes is the kill. Loki isn't going to let it be that easy.

Just as Amora fires one last blast, Loki strikes. He releases the power in one foot, launching forward with speed, but he plants the tip of his spear to the ground before he reaches the witch. It catches on a crack in the stone, and his momentum changes, sending him into a sharp turn around the staff. Amora's eyes widen as she tries to backpedal at the last moment, but her power is too depleted to answer her call so easily. Loki catches her with a kick to the side, and he lets the energy release from his other foot, the combined force of his magic and his kick sending her screaming through a wall. He sends a blast of magic after her, and only is only satisfied when the screaming comes to an abrupt end.

"Goodbye, Amora", he jeers with a snarl, turning his back to the destruction. He only hopes that Anthony has held out long enough to be saved.

* * *

It's like being a butterfly pinned to a wall, or so he imagines. It's hard to really understand how a bug being pinned down must feel, but Tony is pretty sure that they are already dead at that point, while he is still so unfortunately alive despite Amora's efforts to the contrary.

Not that she didn't do a pretty damn good job - the spear sticking out of his chest attests to that - he just wishes she had picked something a little quicker and a hell of a lot less painful. Still, this all makes Tony want to laugh, because he knows without a doubt that his arc reactor is shattered into a thousand million pieces, all piercing his chest just like that shrapnel. The thing that's killing me is keeping me alive, he thinks, but that doesn't sound quite right, though for the death of him, Tony can't remember why. The thoughts in his head are turning to grains of sand, or maybe water, slipping through the grasping fingers of his consciousness. It's funny though, because the arc reactor is now shrapnel too, and it's all shrapnel and metal and death with his name on it in big letters, and it's painpainpain but the pain is funny, too, and he's laughing but it sounds like choking because he can taste the blood in his mouth. It's like drowning, but it's backwards because the water is his blood and it's coming from him, not the bucket of water that they like to hold his head in until he cooperates. Still, this drowning is worse because it's his own blood - his own fault - that he's choking on, just like it's his own bomb in his chest, and his own poison flowing through his veins.

And it's funny too, because his blood tastes like metal and coconuts, just like something else that he can't remember, but there was a bright light then - white and flaring in blinding intensity - but the light now is green and it only comes in flashes against his eyelids. Oh, his eyes are closed, and he doesn't remember that either, but he does recall how to open them, though it shouldn't be so hard, should it? Maybe it's always been that hard, and he just can't remember that either. But when his eyes are open, he only wants to shut them again because there's that witch and his Loki fighting, and Loki looks like he was crying too, and that's not right, because where's Dagan, and why was Loki crying? Maybe Amora killed Dagan, but that thought makes Tony's throat clench up with sadness, and so he stops thinking that, remembering - or not remembering - that Dagan is okay, and Dagan is Loki and Dagan can't get hurt because Loki can't be hurt. Tony won't let Loki get hurt.

The thought inspires him to move, trying to lift a repulsor to aim at the witch, but there's nothing - no
arm comes up, and there's no blast, and that isn't right because he's telling his arm to move and it should be moving but it isn't. He's so tired, though, that it doesn't matter because he would rather sleep, and Loki probably doesn't need him anyway because it's just Amora, and she's practically harmless, though the spear in his chest should say otherwise. But the spear doesn't hurt anymore and his chest doesn't hurt anymore, and that must mean he's all good now, someone fixed him, and they must have given him the good meds because it doesn't hurt and he's sleepy, and maybe if he takes a quick nap, Loki will still be there when he wakes up. Maybe, if he's fast enough, Loki will always be there when he wakes up, and that makes him smile despite how sleepy he is, and Tony is smiling and closing his eyes and he's letting the darkness take him because Loki is there and Loki is safe and Loki was smiling before and that's enough.

It's always been enough.

* * *

Anthony's eyes are closed when Loki reaches his side. The mortal is still pinned to the wall, just dangling there, but he's got this terrifying smile on his face like he's happy, and that scares Loki more than the spear through Anthony's chest because that's how the dead smile when they find peace. In an instant, Loki's magic has stripped away the spear, and he takes Anthony into his arms, cradling the body against his chest. He discards the Iron Man armor as well, because it's useless now, just as it was useless when the spear found it's mark. Loki wants to smile because twenty years and still Anthony is the fool who wears his heart on the outside so everyone can see, but he doesn't smile because there isn't time.

The god lies Tony on the floor, quickly pouring magic into his mortal's body, and he sighs in relief as he finds life still clinging there. It's shallow and fluttering, but when Loki touches it with his magic, he feels it gaining strength. Anthony will be fine, he assures himself, but he needs to focus on fixing the arc reactor, if he can. The device is shattered apart, and so too is it's casing. The glass and metal has embedded itself into the surrounding tissue of Anthony's chest, and the dangerous elements that power it are soaked into his blood, hidden in his body or spilled along the wall. Looking closely, Loki can see that the mortal's spine is severed too. He frowns sharply at that, turning the tide of his magic to this one point, and slowly calling the pieces of the arc reactor to their original place, intent on putting them back together.

They don't heed, and they stay as they are. So Loki tries harder, again calling out to the metal fragments, but nothing happens and they resist his magic. He remembers that first meeting face to face, and how the reactor turned away the spear's power. Loki's throat tightens - of course the arc reactor can resist magic, even after it's been shattered and broken. Amora's spear had only worked because it had taken on solid form before it hit; had it been energy only, it would have been absorbed or deflected away. Loki wants to scream as tears begin to fall, because of course that stupid bitch would get so lucky, and of course Anthony is dying with nothing that Loki can do. He can heal the damage, but he can't remove the shrapnel, and that will kill Anthony just as surely as blood loss now would. Loki presses his forehead to his lover's, and he weeps against the still form beneath him.

There isn't any magic that will save Anthony, or a power that he can call upon to do it for him. There is nothing that will spare the life of this mortal, and Loki wants to scream because all he had asked for was more time. More time to love Anthony and be loved in return. More time to spend with his mortal, and more time to convince the man that immortality - an eternity at Loki's side - was worth it. He needed more bloody time, but he didn't have it, and he should have just forced that damn apple down Anthony's throat, consequences be damned!
But then Loki's mind falls in on itself, and he stops, head snapping up in realization. For all that Anthony is a fool, it is Loki who is truly stupid! He calls the golden apple to himself, knowing that as long as a life still flutters in the mortal's chest, the apple will work as it should. It can heal Anthony, though the process will be painful. It can keep the mortal alive forever, and while it won't remove the shrapnel, it will keep healing any damage the metal shards do until a healer can remove them. Then there will be no need for the arc reactor, and Anthony will be alive and well and Loki can stay with him forever. He doesn't need to lose his love.

The apple falls from nothingness into Loki's hands, and he quickly props up the mortal against his chest, blinking to clear away the tears from his eyes. He should just force the apple down Anthony's throat, but his accursed conscience makes him hesitate, because the man has already said no to immortality once, and he might still feel that way. A pulse of magic forced under Anthony's skin would be enough to sustain him and awaken him, and then he can proceed without worry or doubt. And there is still time yet.

Loki chooses to do that, praying that Anthony will cooperate for once and just eat the apple, but he doesn't feel particularly hopeful when the mortal awakens. "Anthony, I need you to eat this", he does still have to try after all, though Anthony's eyes are half-lidded and glazed. He presses the apple of Idunn to his lover's lips, but the man doesn't bite. Instead, he mutters in confusion, making a noise of inquiry. "Just bite, love", Loki whispers, trying to tempt while keeping his desperation at bay.

But Anthony's clarity is coming back, and with it, his knowledge about the apple. He tries to push Loki's arm away from him, but moving at all sends pain rocketing through his body, and Anthony doesn't try to move again. That doesn't keep him from talking, though. "What the hell, Loki?" The voice is rough from screaming in pain, and from the damage his body has suffered, but he's still an insufferable idiot who has to make Loki's life more difficult at every turn. "Just bite the damn apple, Stark", Loki shoots back, and he's starting to tremble because there's time but not that much time, and he's using all his energy just to keep the man alive. "I can't heal you, so you need to eat the apple".

"I don't even like apples". Oh, Loki is going to kill the man when this is over, because he is lying there and dying but he won't heal himself because of the fucking taste of apples!

"Stark!" he tries to yell, but it comes out as a croak. The adrenaline is wearing off, and the weariness of battle is catching up with him; he closes his eyes against the strain. Stark needs to eat the goddamn apple.

"I don't want it, Loki", and that's not Anthony's 'I'm being intentionally difficult', and Loki opens his eyes to see that the genius has turned to look at him, and there is age and exhaustion in his eyes. "I don't want to live forever, or grow any older either. I'm good like this - dying like this". How can Anthony sound so strong when speaking of his own imminent death, bleeding out across the floor and only present because Loki's magic wills him to be? How can he be strong when Loki is shaking apart at the edges? How can Anthony be as he is and still say no? "I'd rather die a hero, you know?"

It's probably meant to be a rhetorical question, but Loki answers anyway, whispering and shifting closer so that he doesn't have to look at Anthony, instead pressing their faces together. "No, I don't. I would rather not die at all", and Anthony chuckles like it's some sort of joke, but it wasn't and he just needs to eat the apple now. But the man doesn't seem like he is about to give in, and the tears from Loki's eyes are real and burning, and Anthony must feel them too because they are so close, it would be impossible not to.
"Why are you doing this?" Loki questions when Anthony doesn't respond, because he needs to know. If Anthony is going to choose to die, and he's going to leave Loki alone, than he needs to know why. Maybe an eternity with Loki isn't a good thing, or at least not good enough to warrant what pains immortality can bring. Maybe he would rather rejoin his wife in the afterworld - choosing her over Loki at this moment, and forever afterwards. Maybe Anthony just does not wish to live, or seeks to bring Loki pain through his own death. Maybe it's all of that, but Loki needs to know. "Why would you rather die than be with me?"

"Why now?", Anthony asks instead of answering, and the strength in his voice is failing as surely as Loki's magic is. There isn't much left - time or magic - and Anthony might be the one dying, but it will be Loki who suffers. "Why didn't you come back before?"

It doesn't even occur to Loki that he could lie. "Because I am a coward. Because I asked you to wait, but I couldn't believe that you would. Thor came to me and told me that you were still waiting; he said it every time he visited, but I couldn't believe his words. I thought he was lying to ease my heartbreak. And then, after so many years, I was let loose again, and I should have come back to you, but I didn't. I thought you had moved on, but I was too afraid to even visit Midgard and check. I didn't want to see you be happy without me there". Loki bites back a sob that threatens to choke him. "And then Thor came to me one day, raging and angry. He told me that he had spoken with you, and that the truth of my release had been revealed. He demanded I go to you immediately because you were suffering, and you needed me. I still didn't go, at least, not at first". Loki curses himself for the decisions of his past, because now Anthony is dying in his arms, and that might have been averted. "When I did go, you were completely drunk and unaware of me or your surroundings. I was terrified - I could see how hurt you were, and I could see the damage I had caused, so I alerted my brother to your condition then fled the realm. I thought it better if I left, because you had already thought that I had done so, and I didn't deserve your love after everything".

Anthony gasps at some pain, but he doesn't complain about it. "Maybe you're better off without me now". It's a foolish thing to think, and Loki would kill him for it were the man not already dying.

"You are a stupid man, and I could never be better without you".

"I love you". The genius says it like things are that simple, like it's the answer to everything, and saying that out loud will fix everything, but it doesn't, it just makes Loki's tears burn hotter, and he wants to hate Anthony so much right now but he can't bring himself to do it.

"I love you too, Anthony". He says that instead because it's true even if it is painful. "I love you and you are leaving me still". The desperation flares in Loki, and he speaks quickly, words stringing together. "You know what that feels like, to love someone and see them die for your actions. You know the pain and guilt that brings, Anthony. You watched your Veronica die, and now you would have me suffer that same fate".

There's silence, and it stretches for too long, but then a whisper escapes from Anthony's lips. "The apple". It's an agreement, or Loki is willing to believe it is, and he pulls back to bring the golden apple to Anthony's mouth, watching the genius take one weak bite and struggle to swallow. Loki chases that bite with a kiss, letting his magic flow through the touch and down into Anthony, jump-starting the apple's own healing. He can feel the process begin, as the mortal's soul is changed, and slowly the strength creeps back into Anthony, enough to take another bite, and then another. Each piece of apple brings strength to the mortal, and Loki follows every bite with a kiss.

* * *
Tony wakes up to green ceilings, and he groans.

He remembers what has happened - the fight with Amora, Dagan turning out to be Loki, his brief time as a wall ornament, and then that whole eating the golden apple thing. He wishes he could forget most of it, but it seems that golden apples improve memory, and now he'll always know what it feels like to hang from a wall by his sternum. He is sort of glad to be alive, though, and he feels relatively in one piece. Nothing hurts when he looks around at the empty room, and he realizes that it's Loki's chambers in Asgard, but the god is missing. It's a stroke of luck if Tony's ever had one, because Loki is probably very pissed about Tony's near death experience, but maybe Tony can sneak away before Loki catches him. The god probably needs some time to cool off.

That doesn't really work out, however, because as soon as Tony gets to his feet, the door is thrown open and Loki storms in looking livid. And Tony knows he's really pissed when the god doesn't even insult him, instead going straight to the incoherent screeching and lunges, pushing Tony forcibly back onto the bed. Tony blinks as he now is lying down with a lap full of angry Loki, which isn't what he really wants, but there's also an easy fix for that. He catches the god's chin in one hand, and quickly pulls him into a kiss before the shouts form into words. It startles Loki enough that the god goes still in his arms before kissing back with vigour, pouring every ounce of rage and desperation and love into one kiss. Tony returns it with everything he felt when Loki left - the sadness, the betrayal, but also the love, too. It leaves them both panting as they break away, but there is no lust to it, just emotional exhaustion.

"I hate you, Stark", Loki says softly, staying close enough that Tony can feel their lips brushing together.

"No you don't, babe", he replies, because he knows that it's not true now, and he can say things like that without invoking a god's wrath. Something about that statement seems to amuse Loki, because the god huffs with laughter as he places another kiss to Tony's lips. "I am sorry about the whole almost dying thing, though", Tony apologizes, because he does actually know how to do so sincerely, and he figures this is probably one thing he should apologize for.

"You aren't forgiven", Loki mutters, and Tony can hear the lie in it. "But I don't understand why you must always be so difficult - refusing to eat the damned apple, trying to die on me, fighting yourself in that Iron Man suit when it was fully capable of running on autopilot". Tony blinks, startled - he had forgotten that the suit could do that, and Loki must realize exactly what he's thinking because the god just sighs. "Your accursed heroics will be the death of me".

"Well I should hope not", Tony cuts in quickly, before Loki can berate him some more. "You can't die when I just got you back". Loki growls, nipping at the side of Tony's jaw because that should be his line, but Tony only chuckles in response. "And you have me back too". He knows it was the right thing to say when Loki's arms finally unfold from his chest, moving to curl around Tony's body and hold the two of them together. It's comfortable, and nice, and the warmth of physical contact feels good, but it's too quiet, which Loki might prefer but Tony can't really stand.

"So", he questions, drawing out the word until Loki finally looks at him with an annoyed sigh. It's familiar, and feels like coming home after being away for too long. "When do you move in?" That gets the god to blink, obviously puzzled; it makes Tony smile fondly. "I just figured since we've already done the whole make-up and make-out part, and we have confessed our literally undying love to each other, that maybe you would want to hop on down to Earth and kick it at my place for the rest of forever". Now it's Loki who blinks once, slowly, as his mind catches up, but then he's
smiling widely and Tony can't help but to return it.

"I think we can leave tomorrow", Loki says, but the mischief is returning to his eyes too, and Tony is smart enough to feel a bit wary. "However, I refuse to live in that atrocious Tower you have built. You will instead build a new home to my specifications, and at a location of my choosing, and we shall reside there". And Tony smiles because that sounds like the perfect plan, and he knows that Loki has some ridiculous list of demands lined up, but that's just because he's Loki, and Tony thinks he's worth it.

"At least we don't have a kid to worry about", the genius teases back. Loki startles, pulling back to stare down at Tony in confusion again. It's a look that Tony loves, because it is absolutely adorable on the god.

"Why in the world would we have a child?" The question is incredulous.

"Because", Tony begins to explain, biting back on his laughter. "Everyone was convinced Dagan was our secret love child, and that was why you didn't show back up".

Loki snorts dismissively. "As if I would wish to bear your foolhardy child".

"That's what I said!" Tony exclaims, giving in to the desire to laugh. "But no one would listen to me! And hey, I was right - the kid wasn't our kid, it was really just you trying to get your hands on me any way you could".

"Yes, well..." Loki stalls, but his cheeks are lit up red with a blush, and Tony wants to know why. He rolls them, pinning the god beneath him on the bed, and stares down at Loki.

"You had to know I wouldn't go for a teenage kid, though", Tony speaks, his voice muffled slightly as he nuzzles Loki's cheek. "Or did you just want the fantasy fodder?"

"It wasn't about the sex", Loki protests, but Tony isn't buying it.

"Babe, you're cheeks are practically glowing they're so red. Of course it was about the sex". Then something occurs to Tony, and his grin turns sly against Loki's skin. "What were you doing when you weren't with me, Loki?"

"The library." the god starts, but Tony speaks over him.

"Don't lie to me now! What were you doing?" Tony can hazard a guess on his own, but he wants to see if Loki will admit to it.

Taking it for a challenge, Loki glares despite how flushed he is. "I was touching myself". His face dares Tony to laugh, but the genius doesn't, instead rewarding Loki's honesty with a kiss.

"Couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"No", the god growls. "Changing form like that means that I actually was a teenage boy, with all the problems that brings. Even when switching back, there's still hormonal holdover, and it can take a bit to wear off".

"Hormonal holdover, huh? Is that why you're blushing like a virgin at a strip club?"
Loki scowled even harder at the comparison. "Spending so much time in that form has thrown my body into a second puberty of sorts, and it's very unpleasant".

"That sounds terrible", Tony mockingly sympathizes, but he drops his head to rest against Loki's neck, trailing his lips up to Loki's ear as the god shivers. "I could always help you out with that", he murmurs, planting a kiss just below the god's ear. That's already enough to have the god moaning - a second puberty indeed - and Tony can't help it anymore. He bursts out laugh, chest shaking with it as Loki glares up from underneath him., displeased both by the mockery and that Tony stopped helping with the sexual frustration.

Tony's still laughing when Loki tries to shut him up with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I lied, these are the last great words from the artist:

"OMG you posted the thing! The thing is posted! I want to hug you and jump around! I also want to grab those two and knock their heads together. They're lucky they found each other, because I can't imagine who the hell else would want their stupid asses. "You are cordially invited to the wedding of Mr. I-got-first-date-jitters-and-showed-up-twenty-years-late and Mr. Whoops-I-forgot-that-the-suit-I-made-does-the-thing-I-made-it-do." It's a good thing they're pretty. Why do we like them again? Oh yeah, it might be because they're snarky and clever and badass in battle and make magic and technology and the rest of the world their bitch."

End Notes

Find the artist at: http://the-dreaming-grass.tumblr.com/
Find the author at: http://schadenfreudessa.tumblr.com/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!