**Spellbound**

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**Summary**

Thor is dead, Tony's been framed, and they've thrown him in a cell across from his favorite psychopath. Needless to say, Tony Stark has had better days.

**Notes**

This story takes place within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, roughly six months after the end of The Avengers. While there may be references to both Iron Man 3 and Thor: The Dark World, no events from either of those movies have taken place (yet).

It should be noted that while this story may seem to incorporate a major character death into the plot, it does not. Later chapters will make this clearer.

Available [here](https://archiveofourown.org) on Fanfiction.net. Originally titled "Framed."
When he was placed in a holding cell his ears were still ringing with the sound of metal striking metal.

There were train wrecks that were in better shape than Tony Stark. He was hunched forward, elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, holding himself in some sad attempt to stop the trembling. He covered his eyes and closed them tight, sucking in through his teeth as his heart hitched in his throat. There wasn't enough oxygen. The arc reactor was creaking, groaning, straining - caught in the jagged remains of his ribcage, stressed by the imagined constriction of his chest. He couldn't breathe.

One hand fisted against his forehead, slick with sweat, pressing in earnest to remind himself to think. To remember. He wasn't there - he was here, in prison, but that was here and not there. Anything was better than there.

Another breath, desperate and fast, but it wasn't enough. He couldn't breathe.

And then the past grabbed him by the throat and dragged him down, down, until the portal engulfed him again and the open universe unraveled before him. Flashes of light burned out the present; Tony was again staring into the darkness, witness to alien life and endless space. He was breathing, but there was no oxygen. No relief. The nuclear explosion was silent, but the force of it rocked through the suit. The armor flickered and failed and he was falling, suffocating - the lights went out. He was a man in a tin can, dying. Alone. Trapped.

Tony fell back to reality, breaking through the surface of his trauma, gasping like a drowning man. He was bent over on the floor on his hands and knees. He could see the stains on his hands where blood had leaked into the suit.

It made him sick.

"Tony."

Concern wavered in Steve Roger's voice. Tony wasn't sure it was sincere, but he couldn't fight away the flickering hope as he looked up.

"Steve..."

His hope faded. The soldier on the other side of the bars looked at him with cold composure, stiff and steady like any trained man would be. He wasn't here to listen. He wasn't here to comfort. What he was here for, Tony didn't know, but it couldn't be anything good.

He pulled himself to his feet and faced Captain America with matched resolve, holding onto the iron bars of his cell for support.

"I didn't do it."

He was done with pleading. He knew they were done listening, too.

"I saw you."

"You-"

"We all saw you."
"God dammit, just listen-"

Then there were two hands grasping his underarmor through the bars, lifting him off his feet. An alarm sounded somewhere.

"Why?!" The word tore through Steve's throat, raw and desperate.

There was no answer Tony could give. Steve threw him across the cell, where he collided with the brick wall.

"Answer me, Stark!"

Not Tony. Tony had been a friend.

"He was an Avenger!" The bars bent around Steve's hands as he pressed them apart, flakes of cement falling from the ceiling as the iron warped where it had been bolted. He advanced. "He was your friend."

Steve hung on the word like it was a lifeline, like the crime was somehow crueler because Tony had known the man. They had all fought together, lived together, but only Tony could get shit-faced drunk with him and buy a small island on a dare. They all had their things, their moments - some bigger than others - that made them a team. They were all friends. They had all loved him. Steve didn't own that.

After all, Tony could hold onto that word just as strongly. It was his proof of innocence. A friend was a friend, of which he had few, and he would burn the world before he burned them.

"Exactly, Rogers."

Steve tensed up and took a step forward, but then Natasha was there. Hawkeye was close behind, arrow notched and loosely aimed as she touched Cap's arm. Bruce Banner was nowhere to be seen.

"Captain, fall back."

Tony rubbed his shoulder as he watched Agent Coulson enter the room.

"I didn't touch him." Steve shrugged Natasha off, glaring at the floor.

Coulson gave one pointed nod as he stepped through the bent prison bars. Tony looked him dead in the eye, searching, but good ol' Agent didn't give anything away.

"How's the ribcage?" he asked instead, brushing off the seriousness of the situation.

"Less sore, thank you." It was a diplomatic response, short and clipped, and then Coulson turned his attention to the Avengers around him. "Anthony Stark is currently is protective custody, Captain, and we can't have him threatened on our watch. Asgard expects us to hold him safely until he can be transported."

Tony blanched.

"Asgard?"

There was no response from the party at large. Steve's expression warped into something hard and apathetic, but it was tainted with shame.
Had he known? Had he come down here to tell him?

Clint lowered his bow completely. "'S'cuse me?"

Steve sharply turned his head away as Natasha folded her arms, looking first to Coulson before her gaze darted back towards Tony.

"What he said." Her voice was deceptively collected. Tony though he saw the hairs on the back of Coulson's neck stand straight up.

So they hadn't known. Fury had sent Steve down to be the bearer of bad news without consulting the team.

This could be bad, Tony thought. Very, very bad. Though whether it would be bad for him or for Fury and friends had yet to be seen.

"You're sending him where?"

Tony's gaze shot towards the doorway beyond his former team, where Dr. Banner was standing in the doorway. He was dangerously tense.

"Stay calm, Bruce," Natasha was saying, turning to face him.

"-I am calm. But if you're handing Tony over to Asgard for judgement-"

Clint's grip on his bow tightened again as Bruce stepped over the threshold. Steve and Coulson blocked the cell's warped opening with their bodies, either to keep Tony in or Bruce out.

"Bruce, he murdered him-" At least Steve tried for calm, this time.

Tony managed to stand up. Bruce clenched his fists and closed his eyes in his best effort to maintain inner zen. The atmosphere of the room quickly escalated from code yellow to code red.

"It's all right, buddy." Tony tried to find his sense of humor. "I'm not afraid of some old men in dresses."

A pause. Time for Bruce to breathe, to force out a humorless laugh through a bitter smirk. Only Tony could joke at a time like this.

"Gentlemen. Natasha." Coulson said, playing diplomat, "This matter is now out of our hands. The arrangements have been made. Tony will be tried in Asgard, like Loki."

A crock of bullshit. This wasn't anything at all like Loki. Fury just wanted to sweep this pretty little mess under a rug and cart him off to a place where SHIELD couldn't take the blame for whatever happened. One-eyed bastard.

"But Tony isn't Loki."

"No." Steve agreed, turning his back. "He's worse, Banner."

Twenty-three hours later Tony was transferred to Avengers Tower. Pepper was forced to shut down JARVIS to primary functions and Clint tossed a suitless Iron Man in the Hulk Tank, leaving him to rot.

Tony decided that this was for his own safety. After all, Steve had pulled apart those prison bars like he was straight out of a cartoon. But it was just added insult to injury to lock an engineer in a
prison he’d designed himself.

This was Hulk Tank 2.0, safely nestled inside the security of Avengers HQ. It was located on Banner's floor, meant to give him somewhere to go if there was a sudden anger management crisis. At first Tony had been hesitant to make it. They could deal with a little Code Green no problem, he’d argued. But Banner had insisted and now it was Tony's personal little hell. With no visitors and no AI to talk to, he was worried he might go insane.

So in the small amount of time he had been left alone, Tony had managed to pry out some of the ceiling tiles to expose the grid of concealed support beams. He was doing pull-ups off one of them when the elevator across the room opened with a pleasant ping. He didn't look to see who it was, instead continuing with his distraction.

"Three cheeseburgers and a large coke, please." he dismissed.

"Tony."

Virginia Potts was standing on the other side of the glass wall, a picture-perfect ideal of purpose and calm. She had a tablet and a clipboard clutched in her hands, betraying her only tell: her knuckles were gripping white.

"Pep." He dropped down from the ceiling and a mess of words spilled out of his mouth before he could stop himself. His hands were on the glass and he was leaning towards her, desperate. "I'm telling you, Pep, it wasn't me, the suit just went, JARVIS wasn't responding, something glitched, something went wrong, the HUD went down and it wasn't me and I couldn't-"

She shook her head, placing her hand against his.

"I know it wasn't you, Tony."

His relief nearly knocked him to his knees. He exhaled hard and closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the cool glass. Of course she would believe him.

"All the evidence says it was." she admitted, trying to be gentle, "I've got Fury and SHIELD drowning in paperwork, but there's nothing else I can do. An interstellar incident, they keep telling me, and JARVIS' records... they..." she swallowed, "You don't have many good cards in your hand."

"Just pull the flight logs." he suggested, "There's got to be something in them. An inconsistency. A hack, maybe."

They both knew no one could hack into those suits. He was grasping at straws.

"The flight logs are normal, Tony. JARVIS has scanned everything a million times, and he's sure there's no inconsistencies. With the video feeds on top of that... everyone is convinced."

"Why aren't you?"

"Because I know you, Tony. They don't. This isn't you."

His heart swelled. If ever he had seen an angel, she was standing in front of him. Perfect, graceful, loyal Pepper.

"Then let me out." he whispered, meeting her gaze, "Remote activate Mark I and II and we..." But he trailed off, seeing the pain in her eyes. She wasn't here to spring him. She wasn't Bonny and he wasn't Clyde. "Pep..."
Her lips pursed into a thin line. She looked down and away, trying to compose herself. He felt the overwhelming urge to reach out and wrap her in his arms, as if that would fill the craters inside them.

"I'm trying." she promised, "I'm trying, but... it doesn't look good."

He shook his head, looking up to her.

"I'll figure this out." It was a promise.

"You always do." She smiled weakly. "I'm here to help you get things in order." Her admission was quiet, heartbroken, and she finally his gaze again. "Bruce says..."

"Forget him."

Tony took a deep breath, shoulders slumping in defeat. Sliding to the floor, he sat, legs crossed and a hand scratching at the stubble of his beard. He looked like shit. They hadn't let him shave (which was a crime in and of itself) and his signature goatee had grown out. He tried not to think about the fact that he was still wearing his under armor, which was stained with splatters of Thor's blood. No one had given him anything else to change into. Maybe they needed to see the blood to remember his guilt.

Pepper followed suit, folding her legs underneath herself and placing the clipboard on her lap. She exhaled and gathered her hair up into a bun, clipping it into place.

"It's only just in case." she promised.

Like that made it any better.

"Just... let's get it over with." Tony resigned himself to the task. "What do I need to sign?"

They talked for hours to settle out his affairs. Tony didn't have any children (that he knew about), so Pepper was going to get it all - the company, his houses, his robots, his suits, and JARVIS. Everything. She could either burn it all or keep it; he didn't care. The only thing they signed away to someone else was Avengers HQ, formerly known as Stark Tower, to Steve. He would get that, along with a small chunk of money. Though, "small money" to Tony was subjective. He told himself he was funding the protection of the Earth, not the asshole soldier who wouldn't believe him.

When it was all done, Pepper gave the paperwork to a robotic arm that dropped down from the ceiling. It would transfer their work inside the cell. Tony took all of it in steady hands and ignored his pet peeve, but his eyes were on his once-secretary.

"I'm sor-"

She shook her head, staring him dead in the eye.

"Don't you dare."

He smiled a little and looked down to the clipboard.

"Yeah, I don't like goodbyes either."

A pen sat on top of the paperwork, waiting, but she had left him a more important gift. Hidden halfway through the stack was a inconspicuous little ear piece.
Pepper was an angel. A gift from God. The Eve to his Adam, or maybe the Steve to his Bucky.

One sly sweep of his hand later, he had it tucked away in a pocket while he pretended to double-check their work. He would have kissed her if not for the glass.

"There."

He signed the last page and buried the pen underneath it all. The cap peeked out the side of the papers and he shoved his hands in his pockets, letting the robotic arm return all the paperwork to the new CEO of Stark Industries.

"Thank you, Mr. Stark."

Despite her formality, her eyes were only sad. Again she placed her hand to the glass and Tony mirrored the action.

"If you die, Tony, I swear to God I'll kill you." she vowed.

He couldn't help his smile.

"You just take care of the kids, Pep. I'll be all right. Always am."

They both took a deep breath of finality, hands falling from the glass. Pepper gave him a false smile and Tony faked one back.

"Thanks. For everything."

If Tony had started thanking people, things really were bleak.

Two days later they carted him off to New Mexico. An angry brunette slapped him when they got there and Steve dragged him to some designated place in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere, refusing to look at him the entire time.

Tony didn't waste his breath trying to convince them that he was innocent. He was quiet until he and Steve stopped at the Bifrost point, Captain America's grip far too tight on his upper arm.

Bruce hung back by the quinjet and watched, cleaning his glasses abnormally often. Pepper was with him, in attendance even though Steve had been against it. She had told him he could kiss her star-spangled ass when he had protested and Tony remembered why she was his favorite CEO. Ever.

"Just make sure they get my arc reactor back to Pepper, Rogers." Tony murmured when they came to a stop, his eyes on the open sky above.

Steve gave him a sidelong glance, silence stretching for a long moment. But he eventually gave a stiff nod and there was a flash of sadness in his baby-blue eyes.

Well, maybe ol' Rogers did care about him after all.

When the Bifrost beamed him up Tony forgot all about the grief he had seen in Steve's eyes. Jarred and confused after interstellar travel, it was a miracle he remembered what the goddamn behemoth of a man had told him when he arrived. Heimdall had welcomed him to Asgard, then said some foreboding words about death before a small infantry of Warriors showed up.

Guards in gaudy gold outfits hauled off the one and only Tony Stark down a rainbow bridge as he
wondered how much damage he could do with the pen he had knicked off Pepper.
There was death in the villain's eyes.

Tony swallowed. Pressed up against the far wall of his shiny new hospital-white prison cell, he tried to look at anything but the seething God of Mischief. The floor, the stone columns, the guards, the shimmering force field - anything that would keep his attention away from one royally pissed off brother of Thor.

What sort of sick joke was this? Stick the mortal in the cell across from the guy who wants to gut him - that's a wonderful idea. He might even be dead before the execution!

The Warriors Three, a hulking and intimidating gang of Thor's warrior-friends, had dropped him in this hotbox. Tony had tried to convince them he was innocent, hoping that the Asgardians were more persuadable than SHIELD, but they ignored him; everyone did. All they could see was the dried blood on Tony, splattered across him like a bad piece of modern art.

Thor's blood.

"The great and mighty Thor Odinson, struck down by a man encased in mechanics." Loki's voice cut through the silence like a blade, a deep and angry tone to it. He paced like a caged animal. "They say that you, a mere mortal, felled the greatest warrior of Asgard. Were he not such a fool I would think it impossible."

"I-"

Loki stopped dead in his tracks, spinning on a heel to face Tony directly.

"Silence, Stark, lest I rip the tongue from your mouth and feed it to you."

Tony's jaw set. Thor's little brother was a royal pain in the ass, and he really didn't give a flying fuck whether or not Loki believed him, but he did not want to be number one on that shit list without a suit in immediate range.

"I didn't kill Thor. That's your thing."

"You've the gall to deny it when you stand bathed in his blood?" Loki spat.

"If I was lying, wouldn't you know?" he countered, glaring. "God of lies, and all? Or maybe you've lost your touch after we beat the shit out of you - no, it's all right, I get it. A good Hulk-out can do a number on a guy."

This earned him a deadly look, but Loki's eyes had moved from murderous to calculating. Seeing the opening, Tony stood right at the edge of the cell and looked him dead in the eye.

"Give me a reason. Just one reason I would have to kill Thor." he dared, "It doesn't make any sense, does it?"

Loki's gaze bore into his soul for what seemed like hours. Despite this treatment, however, Tony didn't budge. He matched the gaze and stood strong, refusing to back down.

After an eternity Loki let out a short laugh, amusement washing the anger off his face.

"I believe you."
Tony felt somewhat uncomfortable with the amount of relief that brought him. Loki was now watching him intently, a smile tugging at his lips. Tony was like an ant under a magnifying glass, itching with anxiety.

"Oh, I like this." A lethal grin came across the Trickster's face.

When Loki liked something, it never meant any good for anyone in a twenty mile radius.

"If you wish to survive this, Anthony Stark, you will tell me what happened betwixt you and Thor, with no detail spared." The sorcerer glided into a chair, green eyes still on his new friend. "It may save your pathetic little life."

Tony swallowed through the lump in his throat and took a deep breath. Alarms were sounding in his head and every voice in his mind was urging him not to say a damn thing. But if he wanted to get out of this, a deal with the devil might be his only choice.

He sighed and fished the ear piece Pepper had smuggled him from his pocket. He put it in place just for the comfort of it, then began to tell his tale.

Loki didn't talk to him after that. He paced his cell, read books, tossed a little figurine up and back about a million times, and slept. Tony realized he should be grateful that the God's attention was off him, but the silence was infuriating.

So he started assessing his surroundings, poking at the walls of light that kept him in his pretty white box. Once, he poked too hard; an explosion of energy shot him back from the perimeters of his cell, slamming him against the far wall with a resounding crash. Fingers now burned and ego bruised, he did his best to ignore the snickering guards. But that wasn't about to stop the caged mechanic.

Tony did this for days - or for what seemed like days, at least. It was impossible to tell. He poked and prodded at the corners of his box, where white wall met magic wall, and his hands traced the seams of the panels in the ground. No one seemed to pay him any mind; to them, he was some crazed mortal on a quest to escape the greatest prisons of Asgard. He wouldn't succeed.

A problem only arose when Tony started taking notes.

"Hold your horses." he put his hands up in surrender, a simple ball-point pen weaved through his fingers, "It's just a pen."

Tony was aware that the issue was that he had a scary, pointed object, and not that he had begun to scribble all over the walls of his prison. Though it wasn't out of the range of possibilities that he could've been breaking some obscure Norse law. Defacing kingly property, maybe?

"What sorcery is this, mortal?" one of the guards snapped, "How did you come into possession of that item?"

It was their own damn fault they hadn't searched him. As far as security went that was a little pathetic, but Tony had chalked it up to them being overconfident in their jailing protocols. That was obviously wrong, because he now had two guards with silly golden helmets shaking spears his way, all over a little ink in a plastic tube.

Loki was watching. The Prince was lounged in his chair - why did he get a chair and Tony got a cold, hard floor? - with a book in hand, now resting lax in his lap as he observed the situation at hand. He paid no mind to Tony's glances, idly scanning over the notes that had been written on
Tony's walls.

"It is *my* sorcery, you fools." Loki snapped his book shut loudly as he stood, smirking as the guards jumped in response. "Can a Prince be allowed no entertainment? Let the mortal scribble. Neither you nor the throne of Asgard is offended in his nonsense."

Tony's eyebrows shot up. The last time Loki had "helped" him, he'd been "helped" straight out a window. Not that he preferred that treatment. No, this change of spirit was quite welcome, albeit suspicious.

"Return to your posts." Loki gave a dismissive wave of his hand, "I assure you, if he manages to gut anyone with a writing utensil, I will lay my neck on the executioner's block in your places. Be it on my honor as a Prince of Asgard."

The hand resting across his heart was a little more than needed, but despite the obvious mockery, the guards were calmed. They returned to their posts, neither wanting to go against their Prince nor test his patience. Someone might just end up dead.

To Tony's sudden displeasure, he realized he had re-earned Loki's attention.

"*Don't give them a reason to kill you. Not yet.*"

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin, eyes wide. A palm went to his ear-piece, which had been presumed dead until now. Loki's damn voice was coming through it, peppered with static. The sorcerer chuckled in his cell and returned to his book.

"Asgard is leagues ahead of you and your metal men, Anthony Stark. *As am I.*"

It didn't take long for Tony to have the walls covered in what Loki called "utter nonsense." Once white walls were now more like the pages of a journal, with Tony's black handwriting and sketches nearly filling up one entire side of the room. He didn't seem to be getting anywhere with anything, much to Loki's amusement, but it kept him from going insane.

As for Asgard's Next Top Model, he had moved on from the cold shoulder to commenting on everything Tony did, just to get under his skin. The silence must have gotten to him too, and now Tony was the unwilling participant of Loki's scrutiny.

But at least the guy was clever.

"Asgardian children better understand the concept of magic than you do."

Then again, that didn't mean the commentary was appreciated.

"Well then, enlighten me, Obi Wan." Tony challenged, throwing him an annoyed glare. "Instruct your young Padawan the ways of the Force."

Loki raised an eyebrow at this.

"Your references to Midgardian culture are lost on me. You realize this."

Tony wouldn't dignify that with a response. Anyone who didn't appreciate the original trilogy didn't deserve his time of day.

"But..." he seemed thoughtful, "...perhaps there is merit to your words, nonetheless."
Loki was lying on his bed, tossing that figurine up in the air again. (It was a wooden horse, but Tony couldn't figure out why it had eight legs.) When he folded his hands behind his head and glanced to him, the figurine was suspended in the air above him. Tony rolled his eyes. Really, who didn't freak out about a psychopath having magic, but started shaking spears when he had a pen?

"To use your phrase, magic is a 'force.' A force that turns will into reality. It cannot be grasped unless the wielder intimately understands the very fabric of the universe."

Tony's brow furrowed. He opened his mouth, but Loki continued on.

"And once you comprehend it, the energy of the Nine Realms is visible before you. It can be bent and twisted, manipulated and torn asunder. It is power. Unstoppable. The only thing to halt magic is magic itself."

There was a sudden explosion of light as the wooden horse cut through the air and collided with the force field. It ricocheted off, hitting the back wall and clattering to the ground.

"The stronger spell will always prevail."

This caused a momentary disturbance in the wall's transparency, gold veins seeming to pulse as lines of light fanned out from the collision point. Still, whatever the wall was made of seemed to repair itself; in moments, the wall was as clear as crystal again. A flash of annoyance crossed Loki's face and he stood, begin to pace again. He was always pacing.

"Perhaps that is why brother mine could not halt you, Stark."

The scratching of Tony's pen stopped.

"You think-?"

"I know." Loki corrected. "Magic played a part in this farce. Simple magic." He tsked. "To think that I could have turned you to my will without the scepter is almost disappointing."

Tony stood, scratching at his chin. He really didn't like beards. Too bushy, too dirty, and too damn itchy. How did the Asgardians do it?

"Performance issues, like I said. Not uncommon."

Loki gave him a scathing look. "Your attempts at jests do you no kindness, Stark."

He shrugged, running his hand through his hair. "So it was voodoo. Great. How do we prove it?"

"It's not that simple. The magic has long since faded, taking the mark of its caster with it." He shook his head. "Being entranced will not be an adequate defense without proper proof. My opinion on the matter would do you more harm than good in a court of Odin."

Tony groaned. He leaned against a wall, tired rings under his eyes.

"So I'm screwed."

"Yes, Stark. Your future is bleak."

An empty silence fell between them, neither having anything more to say on the matter. Without anything better to do, Tony caught himself watching Loki pace. His eyes wandered up and down and back again; the Prince of Asgard definitely wasn't lacking in the looks department. He was all
legs, leather, and pale skin.

Loki let out a thoughtful hum, pulling Tony from his distraction. If he had noticed the wandering eyes, he said nothing on it.

"In what manner did Thor react during the assault?"

Tony swallowed, looking away. "Why does it matter?" He pressed his back against the wall and let himself slide to the floor, arms resting on the top of his knees. Anxiety brought him to twist his hands.

Loki moved to pick up his fallen figurine, giving it a curious glance as he rolled it between his long fingers.

"A passing curiosity." He murmured. "No more."

Loki placed the wooden horse on his table as he passed, sliding back onto the comfort of his mattress. The silence was deafening.

"He seemed... scared. Didn't fight back." Tony closed his eyes, letting his head rest back against the wall. "It didn't make sense."

Loki's face contorted oddly, as if he was conflicted between anger and laughter.

"The mighty oaf is never afraid."

Once, Tony could have sworn he woke up to the sound of a woman's voice saying his name.

The first time this happened it was during the shift change of the guards. It was impossible to tell the time of day, but Tony always assumed that when the guards swapped out (a twice-daily occurrence) that it was either late night or early morning. There were fifteen minute gaps in between when one group would leave and the other would arrive, though no one seemed to think twice about the lack of supervision. Tony imagined that this lapse in security was because they had some awful changing of the guard ritual to go through upstairs, but even that seemed far fetched for Asgard.

Whoever had woken him was gone. There was no woman to speak of. Half-convinced that he had been dreaming and seeing that Loki was asleep in his bed, he could only groan and roll over on the hard floor. Why did the stupid pale bastard get a bed and he didn't? Sure, Loki was a Prince, but he had tried to commit genocide (twice) and Tony hadn't; that had to count for something.

The second time her voice woke him up, he decided to listen.

"...see Stark, the battle, and nothing else. Thor is lost."

"The Odinforce is imperfect. Pliable. It caters to him." Loki was saying. "For a man with one eye, he relies too heavily on what he sees."

"Loki."

"What? Do you think me wrong?" Tony heard footsteps begin to pace the cell across the way. "He saw me fall. He believed my demise. You saw otherwise, no doubt?" A pause, then Loki continued. "The Odinforce is limited by Odin himself. What he believes will be reinforced. He thought me dead. Now he thinks the same of Thor."
"He is grieving. Be merciful."

"Oh, mercy. I return to him only what he gives to me."

It was then that Tony found himself turning, slowly pushing himself up on one elbow to twist his body towards Loki's cell.

The woman, whomever she was, was dressed to the nines - gold jewelry, braided hair, expensive fabric, and an impeccable fashion sense. Tony imagined so, at least, because he hadn't really had access to the Asgard equivalent of *Vogue*. (At least Fury had offered Loki a magazine when he'd been cooped up in the Hulk Tank.) She was seated inside the cell at one of Loki's low tables, looking quite ruffled in the most regal way. Loki had his back to him from his seat across from her.

She was older than Loki, Tony guessed. Knew him, somehow. He had his bets somewhere between relative and creepy sorceress side-piece.

Her gaze fell on him quite quickly, however, and Loki turned sharply around to glare at him. All it took was a deliberate flick of his wrist and the scene morphed into something far less conspicuous; Loki's image was now in bed, tossing that goddamn figurine up into the air over and over again.

Well, that was new. Or maybe it wasn't. Shit.

Tony rolled back over and tried to go to sleep again, not at all impressed by Asgard's complete lack of concern over Loki. The fact that a prisoner had the ability to magically bullshit them any time he wanted to was not only troubling, but it displayed a sad standard for security protocol. Tony had seen small-town police stations that had been more cautious than this. Hell, DUM-E could do better than this, armed with only a fire extinguisher and handcuffs.

Maybe they didn't know they had a Houdini locked behind bars, he thought. Loki didn't seem to give a shit one way or another if Tony knew what his capabilities behind force fields were, but maybe he had been sly enough to keep it under wraps otherwise.

If that was the case, Tony decided Asgard was full of morons.

As he drifted back to sleep he contemplated selling the Iron Man specs for a pillow and a blanket.

Imprisonment was a bitch.

At first, it hadn't been so bad. There were plenty of distractions to keep him busy, and when his hand cramped from writing all over the walls, Loki might even be in a decent enough mood to talk to him. Now that he wasn't running around New York blowing shit up, Tony had the opportunity to learn exactly who Thor's little asshat of a brother was. And, frankly, what he learned surprised him.

When it came down to it, Loki was smart. Scary smart. Almost-as-smart-as-Tony smart. The Asgardian had a vast knowledge about almost everything, even if he feigned disinterest over Earth. Midgard was for the fools, he claimed, and that was why Thor was so fond of it.

Not to anyone's surprise, one of Loki's favorite past-times was bargaining. Even a conversation was a transaction.

"A story for a story. That is my price."

Loki dealt in the currency of words, and luckily, Tony was plenty full of those. It was a story for a
story, a lie for a lie, and a truth for a truth. So on and so forth.

Still, they didn't talk all the time. Enemies, and all that; they had a habit of pissing each other off. It was when these silences came that Tony began to feel claustrophobic, the no-longer-white walls of his cell stifling. He'd had tried to sleep it off at first, but that hadn't worked for long. Without distractions, the nightmares returned.

When he dreamt, he dreamt of Thor. Memories came back to terrorize him and he was on the streets of New York again, standing over his friend. The suit attacked and Tony watched from inside himself, helpless to stop it; Thor didn't fight back and there was blood, so much blood, and then a patriotic shield came from right field and knocked Tony flat off his feet. It sent him barreling towards the black asphalt.

But that blackness would change before he hit the ground and another dream would swallow him, bringing him into the void of the Chitauri all over again, until he blinked and Thor was back on the ground in front of him. It would continue like this, Tony dropping in and out of two different nightmares, each getting progressively worse with each visit. The Avengers would fail the Earth in one and Tony would slaughter Thor in the other; Loki victorious would rise from the rubble of New York and his brother's corpse would lay beaten and battered in it.

It would end when Tony awoke in a cold sweat, suddenly on his feet and dizzy, hands trembling. His heart pounded beneath the arc reactor until he realized where he was again. Asgard with no JARVIS, no suits, and no phone to call Pepper with. It was just himself and a panic attack.

Too shaken to care what anyone thought, he would take refuge in a corner and try and calm down.

Eventually, he would just stop sleeping all together.

There were pregnant women that were more emotionally stable than Loki.

"You are the most insufferable being I have ever had the displeasure of knowing, Stark."

Well, he wasn't the first to feel that way.

Tony shrugged, continuing his sketches on the wall. He felt like he hadn't gotten far with understanding how the barrier worked to keep him in, but he did know that it had a breaking point. Like water's surface tension, if you pressed too hard and applied the right amount of force, the field might give way. In theory. Now he just needed to decide how much theoretical force was needed.

"I'm just saying. The horns are a bit much."

Loki scoffed, rolling his eyes.

He began to pace again. For a while it was tolerable, but soon the footsteps starting to drown everything else out. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing.

"Why are you always pacing?" he muttered, "Unless you're planning to burrow to China, it won't do you any good."

Loki gave him a tired look, his hands twitching with pent up frustration.

"Would you not pace in my position?" he asked, tilting his head towards him, "I have been left to rot and wither until my history becomes nothing but legend and fable. I have been stored away
like a relic, but I shall be damned to Hel if I allow dust to settle on my bones."

"But this is just a little time out for you, isn't it?" Tony pointed out. "You're immortal. They can't keep you in here forever. And if they could, you wouldn't let them."

"Æsir immortality is a rumor of your ancestral tales. A natural death is possible. Not all perish by way of battles and blood." Loki paused, glancing at himself in a mirror. "But yes, you are right. I will not let them."

He straightened up, turning his full attention back to Tony. The engineer had gone back to writing on the walls, old equations for the Mark I suit spilling out just because he felt like it.

"Why do you not pace? Your time is running thin, passing like sand in an hourglass. My cell is my home, but yours is temporary."

Ah, there was the bait. This time Tony decided to bite.

"What do you mean?"

Loki's smile curved his lips.

"Do you think they mean to keep you here? Odin would rather wipe the bloody memory of Thor's death from history than preserve his killer."

"It wasn't me. You don't even-"

Loki held up his hand. "It does not matter what you and I think. If the All-Father believes that his son is fallen, then your untimely grave is nigh. Unless..."

This couldn't be good.

"Oh no. No, no - you threw me out a goddamn window, Loki. You burned New York. You stabbed Coulson. You tried to take over the planet and you tried to kill me and my friends in the process."

Loki laughed. "You truly believe that I lost to the likes of you? You and your Avengers, your rag-tag team of misfits and rejects?" He took a seat in his chair, folding his fingers together. "I fell because I wanted to."

Tony's brow furrowed, anger and confusion clashing in his eyes.

"You're telling me you killed hundreds of people and destroyed an entire city just because you, uhm, felt like it?" he demanded, standing, "You got an army just because of some self-esteem issues and a Daddy complex? I know you were adopted, kid, but that doesn't mean Daddy doesn't love you."

"He is not my Father."

Loki's amusement vanished with a flash of anger and he was on his feet, back to pacing. Great.

"There are monsters beyond these realms." Loki's jaw set, his words bit out through gritted teeth. "It was by their hand that I was torn from the abyss. They proclaimed me an ally and I let them believe it, because they gave me the opportunity I was seeking."

Loki's gaze was controlled, leaning towards intimidation. But in it there was a fracture. Misted eyes betrayed emotions that were matched with reckless desperation; ghosts of lasting, terrible
"My coming was a warning, Stark. An opportunity for Midgard to grasp reality and know that you aren't alone in the universe. Your heroes and super-men pale in comparison to those you have yet to reach. But when they come, I gave your people that inkling of a chance to stand against them. Thor's protection will not stave off all threats."

"You know, you could have just shot us a text if you cared so much." Tony snapped, deflecting his discomfort with dry humor. "Might have saved some time."

"But moreover, it was an opportunity for my return home." Loki didn't acknowledge Tony's interruption. "I have no need for your planet and its empty throne. My sights shall always be set upon Asgard. Nowhere else."

To his credit, Tony managed to stay somewhat calm.

"And you couldn't have just magicked yourself back!?!" Tony slammed his fist against the wall, angry. "Why the hell did we have to get caught in your crossfire? Look where it got you - in a fucking cell, buried away where no one gives a damn about anyone."

Loki snarled. "You have not seen the endless universe. Been raised like cattle to the slaughter - lied to, betrayed, and then abandoned. Those who plucked me from the stars did not first call me friend; only once I proved my mettle did they decide that I would be better use as an ally."

Tony felt the ground beneath him turn ice-thin. Moments from his own past threatened to rise up, but he swallowed them down. He dared to ask the question:

"Whatever they did-"

Loki gave a sharp laugh, cutting Tony short, and turned away.

"I'm capable of patience, Stark, but you try it every time you open your mouth. Torture? Is that what you imply? Be merciful and cease projecting your past onto me."

Now it was Tony's turn to look away. He shouldn't be surprised Loki knew, but it still felt like his privacy had been violated. It was no secret that he had been in Afghanistan. But what exactly had happened in that cave? Only JARVIS and Pepper knew that, and it was damn well going to stay that way.

He sat back down, returning to his equations and refusing to take the bait. If Loki wanted the gruesome, intimate details, well, he could go fuck himself.

"Iron Man was made in that cave." His voice was stone cold. "Did those allies of yours make you you?"

A long silence stretched between them, both men focused intently on something else. Invisible sparks were flying, the tension in the air palpable. But Loki took a patient breath to dispel this, closing his eyes.

"...I am what I am destined to be. I shall never not be, no matter the cost."

No matter what that turns you into, Tony translated.

Loki turned back around to face him, deceptively calm. "But let us speak on more pleasant matters. I believe I had a proposal for you before you derailed the conversation."
Tony groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Look, Hamlet-"

Then the dungeon's doors swung open, bringing their conversation to an abrupt halt. Thor's warrior-friends entered, three of them striding forward like they owned the place. A woman followed in their wake. Loki offered them a pleasant, deceitful smile as they approached, but none of them even so much as glanced towards him. The one with the rather large beard carried chains.

"Ah, the Lady Sif. It didn't take you long. Are communal visits in order? Or do you still mourn?" Loki's tone was sweet as he mocked her, and it made Tony's stomach turn.

Sif ignored him entirely. The blond one shot him a glare.

"You speak of him without love, Loki, when all he ever offered you was his heart."

"I loved Thor more dearly than any of you." He snapped in response, eyes narrowing, "It was you who failed him, not I. Where were you when he took his final breaths, Fandral? Feasting in the glorious halls of Asgard? Why, if you loved him as dearly as you claim-"

"Enough."

All eyes were drawn to the entrance, where another visitor stood. Loki stiffened by fractions and Tony's brow furrowed. It was the woman who'd been in Loki's cell.

"My Queen." Sif and friends bowed, respectful.

Oh. Thor's Mother. Well, he was fucked (royally).

"It is time for your trial, son of Howard." The Queen addressed him simply. "For your own sake, I ask you come in peace. Do not make this any worse than it already is." A pause. "Volstagg, if you please."

Loki chuckled as he sat down in his chair, lounging back to watch the event.

"Do not let my Mother's words deceive you, Stark," he advised, "Only those meant for the executioner's block are ever brought out in those shackles. Whatever 'trial' you may face is a mere farce."

All color drained from Tony's face. The one with his chains, Volstagg, stepped through the barrier and approached him. Out of mere habit, he took a step back, already on edge and defensive.

"Submit, Stark." Tony pressed his palm to the side of his head in shock, having completely forgotten that his ear-piece was still lodged in place. "All will be well, so long as you heed my words."

He looked up to see Loki in his cell, who appeared to be very deeply enthralled in a book. Asshole. Though a good month or so had given him a better outlook on the deranged man that had attacked New York, he still didn't trust him as far as he could throw him. There was no reason that Loki would want to help him, and this wasn't just a game for shits and giggles. Loki didn't waste his time unless there was a prize at the end of the tunnel.

Only because he didn't have any other choice, Tony relented. He straightened up and offered out his wrists, jaw set. There would have to be another time to try and figure out that asshole's motives, preferably when he wasn't up on the chopping block.
"You know, usually, you'd have to buy me dinner first." He quipped, testing the strength of the chains when they secured.

Much to his surprise, both Volstagg and the blond one laughed. For facing the man they thought killed their friend, they were oddly well-natured about it. Sif didn't seem to share their temperament, however, and hit her nearest companion for his response.

"I can see why Thor found comfort in your company, Howardson." Volstagg said quietly, a smile under his Lord of the Rings beard, "It is a shame we meet under such grim circumstances."

"It's Tony." he offered, "And I didn't kill Thor."

"Would it be so." He sighed, clapping Tony on the shoulder. "Let us depart. The All-Father awaits."
Tony could admit he had never seen anything like Asgard's throne room in his life. If people thought he was gaudy, what with his glitz and glamour and shiny metal suits, he'd have to remember to point them in this direction.

Massive and ancient-looking stone columns lined the hall, adorned with detailed artwork and holding up an arching ceiling that seemed to reach up miles above their heads. Glass windows reached nearly as high, giving brief glimpses of the glimmering city beyond the palace walls. From what Tony could make of it, it was a clash of old tradition and the splendor of technology. It was a tech lover's wet dream.

Tony reminded himself to behave, because JARVIS wasn't in his ear to do it for him.

Volstaag and Fandral escorted him down the golden hall, holding the chains that attached to Tony's waist in their grip. Though Tony wasn't much of a physical threat without a suit, they'd quite effectively restrained him; chains attached to cuffs on his wrists and ankles, as well as an uncomfortable collar around his neck. The chain hanging from it was bouncing carelessly off his arc reactor and he dropped his hands lower to get rid of the slack.

When they reached the throne, Tony tried for disinterest when he looked up. Others were bowing around him but he just stared, unimpressed and stressed, deciding that he wasn't going to kiss any ass.

The throne was gilded gold and ridiculously large, making the old, weathered King that sat on its seat look minuscule in comparison. Everything about the scene was ludicrous, from the golden scepter to the ugly horned-winged helm the King wore. But the eye patch - now that was funny. One corner of Tony's lips twitched into a restrained smile. When had he missed the eye patch memo? Fury had obviously gotten it.

"Anthony Stark, son of Howard Stark." Odin addressed him in a cold voice of a King, betraying no emotion. It made Tony stiffen a bit, but he did his best to remain relaxed. He didn't know how he was going to get out of this, but he was going to. He had to. "You stand charged with the crime of murder."

"That's what they tell me."

Quite suddenly there was a blade at his throat, an angry woman holding the hilt of the weapon. Sif really didn't seem to like him in the slightest.

"You will speak to the All-Father with respect, Prisoner." she hissed.

"You're pretty when you're angry." Tony complimented, the blade now pressing against his jugular just a bit too hard.

"Enough."

At Odin's word, Sif's blade fell. Nothing changed in her expression as she fell back to the sidelines, but Tony could relax. Shoulders easing a bit, he looked back to Odin. Order returned to the court.

"Anthony Stark, there was a time when my son once spoke of you as a friend. You stood alongside him as a protector of your realm." The King stood from his throne, his staff standing tall and glinting off the light, "It is to my great displeasure that my son's judgment in you
"He'd probably say that I didn't do it." He took a step forward, but his two guards pulled him back into place. "He'd tell you, and I'm sorry that I don't speak Shakespeare, to go piss off and find out who actually killed him."

"You stand before me with his blood still beneath your nails!" Odin thundered, hammering the end of his staff to the floor to bring silence to the upset rabble Tony's words had brought. "Need you see the proof you already know? So be it."

A light emitted from the ceiling, projecting the damning evidence to all in the court. Instinctively, Tony turned from it, both to preserve his sanity and control his anxiety. He already knew what it was. It was that goddamn video of him in the suit, flying in the sky, and repulsor-blasting Thor out of the air. Catching up to him and landing on him, beating him, relentless...

He was too busy trying to catch his breath to see that the suit's eyes had gone green just seconds before the assault.

"You cannot even look upon your own guilt."

The hologram-magic flickered and died out, leaving angry silence in its wake. Tony forced himself to open his eyes and straighten up, his clammy hands balling into fists.

"That is not me." he insisted through gritted teeth, "Thor was my friend."

"Is that not your armor?"

"It is, but-"

Odin returned to his throne, his features betraying a looked of exhaustion. Grief was heavy on the All-Father's shoulders.

"Then you admit your guilt."

At the King's side, Frigga wrung her hands. Shaken in the sight of Thor's death, she was pale, but her eyes were on Tony. She was waiting for something.

"Demand a trial by worth."

This time, Tony managed not to jump as Loki hijacked his comms. Again.

"If you have no defense to speak of, Anthony Stark, you shall be found guilty and sentenced." The King decided.

Tony blanched, lips forming words that didn't come out. His quick wit wasn't going to save him this time. He shouldn't - couldn't trust Loki. The guy was a grade-A psychopath, and Tony would be stupid to put himself in his debt. There was a reason Asgard had thrown their youngest Prince in the trash like yesterday's news.

"Demand a trial by worth." Loki insisted again, each syllable spoken with precision. "Lest you be fond of death's sweet embrace."

Frigga's eyes still were on him, waiting. Tony looked to her in his panic, and he'd be damned if he hadn't seen her inch her head to nod.

Well, here went nothing.
"Trial by worth."

The hall went as silent as the grave. Odin's single eye glared, full of anger and suspicion. Frigga shifted in discomfort, but she seemed to be relieved. Tony squared his shoulders and stood tall.

"I want a trial by worth."

Again, Odin stood. This time he was truly furious.

"And by what means would you declare a test of your worth?" he spat the last word, very close to trembling, "You, who felled the Prince of Asgard? My son?!"

"If you can lift Mjölnir, you couldn't have possibly killed Thor. It would not yield to the murderer of its former Master." Loki was feeding him the lines like a teleprompter.

I can't wield it, he wanted to say, but he had to be silent. This ear-piece was his last trick up his sleeve.

This wasn't going to work. Whether or not he had killed Thor, his moral worth was always in question. He knew he couldn't lift it. None of the other Avengers could, either. They'd all tried one night, drunk off their asses, and even Steve had only got it about an inch off the ground. Thor had laughed and called their dedication admirable when they all went for a second round.

"The hammer. Thor's hammer." There was nothing to lose. "If I can lift it, I couldn't have possibly killed him."

The tension in the room could have been sliced with a dagger. No one moved. No one dared. As the King of Asgard seethed in anger at the sheer audacity of Tony's request, everyone watched.

"All-Father." Frigga broke the silence, stepping forward towards her King. "Let him have his trial. The throne of Asgard shall be known for justice, not for revenge."

Her hand rested on her husband's shoulder and his anger faded. Tony didn't know what to think. Was she in on this? He didn't put it past Loki to scheme, but with his Mom? Asgard's royal family was more fucked up than he had first thought, and the Queen had a damn good poker face.

"So be it." The King stepped down from his throne, approaching Tony. "In accordance with my law, Anthony Stark, four witnesses shall see to this trial. Two of my choice, two of yours." He stopped a few paces away from him, his one eye boring in Tony's soul. "If you succeed, they will be honor-bound to attest to your victory. But when you fail, you shall be struck down where you stand."

Sif smiled from the sidelines and Tony had the very unsettling urge to kick her in the shins. She stepped forward and knelt, hand over her heart.

"Allow me the honor of being your witness, All Father." she requested, bowing, "It is my duty, as Thor's friend and shield-sister."

The King nodded. "And it is your blade that shall fell him if he fails, Lady Sif. Fandral, you shall accompany her."

The blond man stepped forward, bowing as Sif rose to her feet. She clapped him on the shoulder, but his eyes were on Tony. He seemed perplexed, as if trying to sort out a puzzle.

"Call upon me, Tony Stark, and I swear by the Nine that you shall survive this day."
Tony was pale, Loki's words echoing in his ears. What choice did he have? Loki was his enemy, no doubt, but he was one of three people who believe he might be innocent. It was either him or someone who was going to kill him anyway. At least if Loki turned on him it might be quick...

"Call upon your witnesses, Howardson."

Tony swallowed. He prepared himself for the reactions and, gathering what little common sense he had left, he made his decision. He could already see the Trickster's evil grin, miles below the throne room.

"The All-Mother. Thor's Mom. Frigga? Freya? Sorry, I'm not up to date on my Norse myths." Then, he looked straight into Odin's good eye. "And Loki."

Tony was sure Loki had never smiled so much in his life. The Warriors Three were extremely unhappy by both his choices and Sif had yelled quite a number of protests, but Frigga had stayed her arguments. She wanted to come, she said, to see the man who killed her son face justice. As for Loki, it would do no harm to allow him an hour of supervised and shackled travel. Give him an opportunity to prove he still felt loyalty to the throne.

One field trip and a Bifrost beam later, the five of them stood in the middle of New York.

It took about five seconds for the general population to process the big scary energy beam from the sky and the Asgardians it brought. When they started screaming and scrambling away, Tony sighed. Loki smiled like the madman he was, reveling in the chaos his mere presence brought. It hadn't been so long since his last visit, and, well, that hadn't gone so well.

A moment or two later the most musical, magical sound played in Tony's ear. Static, at first, and then a soft hum and ping and-

"Sir, welcome back." JARVIS greeted.

Much to his credit, Tony managed not to cry.

"Before you respond, Sir, please be aware that Protocol 'Rouge' has been implemented. Ms. Virginia 'Pepper' Potts is now my acting administrator and my Iron Man capabilities have been disabled. Upon your arrival, a message was dispatched to Ms. Potts, Avengers HQ, and SHEILD HQ containing your approximate location. I apologize for any inconvenience."

Two-timing, double-crossing AI bastard. He'd been programmed far too well. But for now, Tony would just have to sit quiet and listen to anything JARVIS felt was important to tell him, because he didn't want to risk his communicator being found out. It was far more useful now than it had been before.

"Sir, I am receiving information that Loki is within your immediate vicinity, as well as three other unidentified Asgardians. Are you in danger?"

Tony glanced around at the streets, where New Yorkers were continuing to scramble as fast as they could. Some had decided to stick around with their phones held out before them, little red lights flashing as they recorded. If anyone was streaming live, Tony was damn sure JARVIS had his robotic eye on him already.

"You appear to be in a hostile situation. Can you confirm?"

He folded his hands in front of him and gave a little thumbs up, which was inconspicuous enough.
"Hostile situation confirmed, Sir. A distress message has been dispatched to Ms. Potts."

Sif pushed Tony forward with a shove right between his shoulder blades, her blade held ready in her other hand. He managed not to stumble.

"To Mjölnir, prisoner. Let your worth be determined."

It wasn't far from here. Just around the corner, on the edge of the sidewalk. It was an entirely normal place, made important only by the evidence of a tragedy. Tony's stomach turned.

Thor had deserved more. If he had to go out, he should have gone out with thunder and lightning and a grand speech, and he should have taken out his killer in the processes. Something like that. Assault on a street corner just didn't fit. Thor was so much better than all that.

When they rounded the corner, they were faced with something much grander than they had anticipated. Mjölnir, which sat in an untouched concrete crater, had been surrounded by candles, flowers, photographs, and all types of offerings. This uninspiring street had become an extraordinary memorial, where the people who had loved Thor had left behind remembrances and mementos. There were cards and drawings that children had left behind, pictures of the Asgardian with lucky civilians tucked in among all the gifts. Street performers lingered around the edge, displaying their art for the man who had protected them all. A few of the younger onlookers dawnd red capes.

Tony took a deep breath, touched by the display. Thor would have loved it. He was always a sap.

"Sentiment. Lovely. Though I am endlessly touched by this display, I do believe we have a charge to be here." Loki mocked, breaking their silence. "Take heed that my visage strikes fear into the very soul of these Midgardians. Their protectors and armies will be here in short moments, their speed twice-encouraged by Stark's re-arrival."

Sif glared at him.

"You are a witness here, Loki, and a silent one. If this is too great of a burden for you to carry, I shall happily relieve you of your tongue."

Loki's smile was sickly sweet. "Ah, Lady Sif, you are welcome to it. So long as you use your tongue to silence mine own."

Tony almost laughed. Innuendos were his game, surely not Loki's. Fandral had to hold Sif back as she jumped forward to strike, but the offending God didn't even cringe. He was laughing, mischievous joy written across his face.

At this sudden scuffle, people's attentions were drawn. Immediately, this street cleared out like the last, and Tony's reality returned to him. He still had a hammer to lift.

Hell. How was he going to get out of this?

"Sir, ETA for Captain Rogers is in two minutes. Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton are en route. I cannot currently locate Mr. Banner."

Great. Wonderful. Three Avengers were going to be breathing down his neck with the Asgardians, minus Loki. Six on two? Not great odds without a suit.

"Let us continue, Lady Sif." Frigga urged, once the warrior had been separated her from her son.

If he made it long enough to face those odds, at least.
The woman nodded, stepping forward and grabbing Tony by his forearm. Her grip was like steel as she pulled him forward, maneuvering through the memorial to plant him directly in front of Mjölnir.

"Prove your worth, Howardson." Sif demanded, letting his arm go. "Or admit to your guilt."

"It's Tony."

She pressed him down with a strong hand, her other making his hand grip the shaft of the weapon. Apparently, patience wasn't one of her virtues.

"Raise the hammer, if you are worthy."

"Why have you said nothing, Mother?" Behind them, Loki stood with Frigga, a mischievous glimmer in his eyes. His eyebrows moved into false concern. "I truly question your loyalty to the throne. Have you no love for Asgard?"

The Queen gave a thin-lipped smile.

"Asgard has my love, Loki. But my loyalty will always be to my family."

Tony heard Fandral try to silence Loki, but then there was the sound of chains hitting asphalt and the Asgardian cursed. Blades were drawn and Tony dived out of the way, Sif's blade cleanly slicing off a few hairs of his head. She struck again in a flurry and he managed to deflect, eyes wide.

"You die here!"

But then there was a figure of green behind her and she cried out, her blade clattering to the ground as she grabbed for her ribs. Loki's hand twisted and she contorted oddly, gasping; he slid his dagger from her side and she crumpled to the ground like paper.

"It is mere curiosity Stark, but can you lift it?"

Green flames leapt up about the duo in a circle, blocking them from view of the city. The memorial began to burn and Tony coughed, smoke filling his lungs. He shook his head as he stood, shielding his face with his forearm.

"I thought not." Loki smiled, "We are too much alike."

A cold hand gripped his forearm and magic encased them both, the prisoners escaping in a burst of green light. Tony thought he heard Steve calling out somewhere in the distance, but he was gone by the time Captain America's shield cut through the air where he had been standing.
A mouthful of sand was not the best way to end an escape attempt.

An escape success, Tony reminded himself, blinking and rubbing at his eyes. Who had escaped three Asgardians and some incoming Avengers? Tony fucking Stark, that's who.

The whirlwind of sand settled as the pair did, green magic whipping away into the early morning air. Loki stood wiping fresh blood off his dagger, seeming completely uninterested in the world around him. It was as if they hadn't just escaped a war-zone-to-be. Green eyes lazily drifted down to Tony as he slipped the blade into his waistband, entirely unimpressed.

"Teleportation is hardly cause for collapse, Stark."

Tony blinked, finally realizing his predicament. He was on the ground in the beach sand, kneeling next to Loki, almost exactly eye level with the magician's- Tony shot up to his feet in one quick movement, absolutely not embarrassed, and busied himself with brushing the sand off his knees.

"Sorry if I'm not used to Apparating, you creepy son of a bitch."

Loki rolled his eyes, striding away from the engineer. It was dawn wherever they were, and the sun cast long shadows onto them and into the ocean. Loki turned pensive as he looked out over the waters, stopping at the edge of the sand. The waves lapped at his feet.

The beach was only a sliver of land between a black cliff face and the ocean, ending when the rocks jutted out into and over the water. They were on the west coast, judging by the fact that the sun didn't rise over the water's horizon. For the moment, Tony wouldn't worry over where they were or why; he wanted to enjoy his first moment of freedom.

He sat down in the sand of and leaned back on his hands, pushing the rest of the world out of his mind. By focusing on the ocean breeze carrying up the salt-water mist, the slight tremble of anxiety and adrenaline ebbed away with the waves. It wouldn't be long until fatigue set in, he mused, and maybe it would finally put him to sleep.

When the slight chill in the air began to bite through the thin layers of his undersuit, he opened his eyes. Loki was still standing at the water, as still as stone, and the shadows of the morning were beginning to shrink.

"JARVIS?"

No response from the AI. Tony frowned at stood up, running his fingers through his hair. Teleportation or not, there shouldn't be any connection problems. As long as they were on Earth.

"Hey, where are we?"

Loki stiffened as he was brought out of his thoughts, turning his head only a fraction to give Tony his attention.

"Have you been away from home so long?"

Tony blinked. He spun sharply around to face the cliffs and, sure enough, his mansion was
perched on the top of them. The curved, sleek architecture was bright with morning's light, as if glad to see its master home.

"How did you know where I live?" He demanded, uneasy.

Loki gave a thoughtful hum, slowly turning his focus away from the waters before him.

"I did not come to Earth blind of its champions, Stark." He walked by him, heading towards a staircase carved into the cliff face. Tony might have protested to see Loki intent upon making himself at home, but he was just as eager to get inside as the troublemaker was.

"I could use a shower." Tony moved to follow him up the path.

"And a shave." Loki responded dryly.

Two hours, one secret entrance and a bathroom visit later, Tony Stark had finally rebooted JARVIS and made his home right again. SHIELD and a number of branches of the United States government had used his apparent turn to the dark side as an excuse to execute a search warrant on his house, but Pepper, bless her heart and soul, had managed to give them the run around. She took advantage of a technicality that classified his workshop as a separate entity than his personal living space; the workshop was an extension of the Stark Industries laboratories, or some bullshit, and they couldn't get a search warrant for a company he wasn't technically CEO of. It was only icing on the cake that while he'd been apparated from New York to Malibu, she seemed to have restored his admin status with JARVIS. Iron Man capabilities and all.

Tony decided he was going to kiss her the next time he saw her, consequences be damned.

The front of his home was decorated in shiny yellow police tape, with a sleeping police detail in his driveway. The situation had almost gone lethal when they'd come across it, but Loki had been talked down from murdering sleeping men. After that, all it took was one deactivated security system and a side door; they were successfully inside and home free.

Down in the workshop, Tony toweled his damp hair as he watched his work unfold, lights flickering on from above. The suit displays lit up like a Christmas tree and brought a surge of warmth to his chest.

"Welcome home, Sir. I apologize for my delay."

"No problem, buddy. It's good to be back."

He slung his damp towel over the back of a chair, going to inspect his suits. The Mark XVII, fondly christened "Heartbreaker," was on the main display, ready for action. All Tony had been doing since New York was building; he'd only been at Avengers HQ for a charity event. His patrol with Thor had just been for kicks.

Hand on the suit's over-sized heart, Tony swallowed. With things settled around him, everything was creeping back into his mind. He had lost a friend - no, he had lost all his friends. They had found him guilty before even giving him the benefit of the doubt.

On one hand, Tony wasn't surprised. They were all warriors. Trained to kill. Trained to distrust everyone but themselves.

But on the other hand, *fuck all of them*. After all they had been through, after all the things they had seen and fought, they'd thrown him under a bus at the first chance. No questions asked. Thor was dead and it looked like Tony did it - that must be truth, right? Nothing else could have
possibly happened.

They had never trusted him.

When Loki came down in the workshop, he would find Tony at the workbench, elbows-deep in Heartbreaker, tinkering about and rewiring.

"Sir, I trust you realize that you have a internationally known criminal as your house guest."

"I assure you, computer, I have been accused of far worse."

Loki all but glided over to Tony, standing on the opposite side of the table as he looked over the work being done on this suit. His dark hair was still damp from the shower, but he had found a change of clothes. Leather and worn golden armor ornamented the Trickster, somehow familiar and yet not the same as the last time Tony had seen him. This get up was meant for someone who didn't want to be spotted. He'd meant to call attention to himself in New York, what with the helm and the cape. Now he aimed for subtlety, wanting ease in gliding from one shadow to the next.

He looked damn good, too. Tony wouldn't admit it out loud, but Thor's little brother definitely had game in the looks department. The Heartbreaker looked better, he decided, and he looked back to his work.

"This is not the device I saw you last in." A pale hand ran across the cold metal of Heartbreaker's arm.

"Brilliant, Sherlock." Tony pulled out of the suit, grease stains up his hands and in between his fingers. He flashed a smile towards Loki. "If you think the last one knocked you off your feet, you'll be blown away by this baby."

Loki's brow arched skeptically, eyes surveying the entirety of the suit in one quick sweep.

"How many have you made since that day?"

Damn, he was sharp. Tony dived back into working on the suit, which was an open-heart surgery with hydrolic fluid instead of blood.

"This is Mark Seventeen." he muttered, "I kicked your ass in Mark Seven."

"Sir."

Tony looked up, then waved his free hand in dismissal.

"Reclassify Loki as a non-hostile for me, buddy, but keep the guns at the ready. No licenses to kill, understand?"

"As you wish. Reclassification of Loki is complete."

Loki gave the ceiling an unimpressed look, but said nothing on his new categorization.

"Where are the Avengers, computer?"

"Sir?"

Tony nodded. "Tell him."

"ETA for Steve Rogers and Agents Barton and Romanoff is thirty-three minutes. And, please, call me JARVIS."
DUM-E then rolled up with a bottle of scotch in his claw, having emerged from the other side of the workshop to get it. Tony greeted him with a smile meant for an old friend, clapping him on the center mechanism as he lifted the drink away.

"You are my best friend in the world right now. I would never donate you to a city college, no I wouldn't..." The robot rolled away with a pleased whir. "And you, Jailhouse Rock, stop gawking at the suit. It makes him uncomfortable." Cranking a wrench inside the metal chest, Tony smiled. "Aaaaand there. Perfect. JARVIS, stitch him up and get him ready."

"Sir." Mechanical arms descended from the ceiling, moving to work at Tony's command.

Loki rolled his eyes, folding his hands behind his back. Tony grabbed a rag and started to wipe off the grease, taking the bottle of scotch with him as he went to his bar fridge. He withdrew two glasses and began to pour, very much anticipating the first taste of alcohol he'd had in months. He offered one to Loki.

"To prison escapes."

Loki looked at the glass with suspicion first, before carefully taking it in his long fingers. He continued to examine the drink, as if convinced Tony might have tampered with it.

"It isn't poisoned." Tony took a drink of his own, not waiting for his toast to be returned, and went to his computer hub.

"Hn." Loki followed him, closing their distance with a few long paces. He leaned against the desk, very nearly sitting on top of it, and took a sip of the drink Tony had given him. "Sif and Fandral were escorted back to Asgard by the Queen."

Tony drank with him, leaning back in his chair.

"And no one's going to come seeking vengeance for the glory of their ancestors?"

"I think not." Amusement tugged at Loki's lips as he crossed his arms over his chest, swirling his drink in his glass. He watched Tony with idle interest. "While the healers fret and worry over cursed and festering wounds, Mother will play politics with your leaders."

"Has she been in on this the whole time, then? Or does she just fall on the 'do not stab' list?"

Loki's lips curved in amusement.

"A mother would do anything to bring her son back into her arms, given the opportunity."

"The Mark XVII is ready, sir."

Tony smiled, a bit more excited than he should be, and stood.

"Sorry, you're on your own when it comes to armor. They don't come in Martian sizes, unfortunately."

Loki rolled his eyes, but didn't bother to threaten him with an unpleasant death for the insult. Tony stepped up on the short dais that was his workshop's centerpiece, JARVIS' mechanical arms descending from the ceiling around him.

"Surely you jest. I would never encase myself in your metal men, Anthony."

Tony frowned. Being on a first name basis with the guy who tried to kill him half a year ago really
hadn't been on his bucket list.

Heartbreaker would assemble around him, Loki's eyes never leaving the mechanic as it did so. To him this was a curiosity; a strange ritual that he now had the rare opportunity to see. For some reason, Tony felt naked under the gaze.

When the face mask lowered, a sense of peace settled over Iron Man. With a deep breath and a sigh of relief, he felt his anxiety slowly ease its grip on his heart. The heads-up-display flickered to life and illuminated his face with a familiar blue wash; JARVIS checked in, bringing a tugging smirk to Tony's lips.

"Sir, the Mark XVII is at 100% functionality and fully up to date."

He was back. Iron Man was back.

"We have an intruder."

Tony blinked, reading the red-light information that popped up on the HUD. "Who?"

"I am uncertain, but Ms. Potts' passkey was used to gain entrance at the main door."

And like a scene out of a bad action movie, there was a loud crash as a red-headed assassin dropped from the ceiling vent above Tony's head. He had just enough time to move out of the way and for the face-plate to snap back down, but it didn't matter. A jet of green light blasted her off her course before she hit her target, a wicked smile on Loki's lips.

Natasha managed to recover enough mid-air that she landed on her hands and feet, crouched low to the ground. A nasty wound split and bloomed on her right hip, a courteous welcoming gift from Loki, and it began to ooze black liquid. Tony cringed, shooting a glare towards the sorcerer.

"Don't kill her."

Loki shrugged. Natasha stood and pulled both her guns on them in one fluid motion, holding them steady despite her injury. The skin was already turning a worrisome shade of green.

"First Thor, and now this?!” she demanded, staring down her sights at Tony.

"It's nice to see you too, Natasha." Tony tried for nonchalant, "Now just put the gun down..."

Her eyes narrowed and she took a shot, which bounced carelessly off his breastplate. He raised a ready-repulsor in response, hoping to stay her hand, but then there was a crash of shattering glass and Loki shoved him out of the way of an incoming shield. There was a flash of green, but the Captain dodged it, and Loki caught an arrow aimed straight at his head.

"Barton." he greeted with a grin, "A pleasure."

Clint cursed something ungodly and Tony grabbed Steve's shield from where it had embedded itself in the wall, using it to block a flurry of bullets Natasha began to unload on him. Each ricochet was a lethal friendly fire risk, and both Loki and Clint had to take cover.

"Sir, incoming Captain America at 3 o'clock."

Tony blasted himself a few feet off the ground to avoid an angry soldier that had been barreling his way, the shield still in his hands.

"All right, everyone. Just calm down."
But then there were six Lokis and everyone was on the ground, a variety of knees in backs and daggers held against mortal necks. The echoing laughter from the lot of them was just a tad overkill, creepy enough to bring goosebumps.

"If your lives are of any consequence to you, Avengers, I recommend you surrender." The real Loki emerged from the other side of the workshop, scotch still in hand.

This was new. The last time Tony had seen Loki's duplicates, they'd been a flickering four corralling a crowd in instead of these completely solid half-dozen, which were strong enough to restrain career killers. The identical grins the lot of them wore were nightmare inducing.

"Show off." Tony grunted. It was fascinating, horror movie vibe aside.

His feet found the ground again and he let the shield drop next to Steve, who was glaring death at Iron Man. Loki looked far too pleased with himself, green eyes flickering from one victim to the next.

"Here we are." He commented softly, a wave of his hand signaling his band of duplicates to bring the trio to their feet. "Earth's mightiest heroes." And then he laughed.

Tony's face-plate snapped back and he took a deep breath, shaking his head. Really, the last time he'd gotten that look from Steve he'd been prodding Banner with a screwdriver to try and get him to Hulk out.

"Ignore him," he advised, giving a dismissive hand wave in Loki's direction, "He's just a little excited to be out of his cell."

Steve wrestled against the two Lokis holding him, but the dagger dug enough into skin to keep him from throwing them off that very moment.

"Stark, I swear to God-"

"You know what, Steve? I've had my fill of Gods, lately." Tony snapped, rounding on him. "I've also had enough of being wrongly imprisoned. Thanks to you, I've been stuck on another planet wasting away in a cell that didn't even have enough goddamn decency to provide wifi, while Thor's killer is still going about his merry way."

"Still trying to blame your mistakes on someone else, huh?"

A rightly timed elbow, kick, and punch disintegrated the illusion that was restraining Captain America. He charged at Iron Man, teeth bared. Tony caught his hands and the metal of his gloves groaned beneath Steve's, the pair posed with stances straining to push the other back. They were like bulls with horns interlocked, pressing to gain dominance.

"I know men worth ten of you." Steve growled, "Men who don't turn on friends and fraternize with the enemy."

A surge of anger flowed through Tony and he threw Steve against the far wall, his expression twisted in rage and grief. Screw Howard for helping bring wimpy little Steve Rogers out of the dark. An iron grip barred Steve against the wall and the cement began to give way under the pressure, metal fingers wrapping around the soldier's neck.

"Going to kill me, now?" Steve hissed, grabbing Tony's wrist with a crushing grip.

"While this is all very entertaining, I do believe it's time for this drama to come to a close."
Loki was dangerously close, then, only a breath away from Tony's face. Before there was time to react, numbness washed over him like a wave. Loki was whispering something in his ear in a language he didn't know, two fingers pressed to his temple, and close enough that Tony found himself lost in the sensation of cool breath on his neck. He was fading fast, drunk off the scent of leather and earth, while something began to seep into his very bones and take hold. It was like molten lava running through his veins, a touch of ice rushing behind it to chase the burn away; something completely otherworldly and a heartbeat away from being lethal.

By the time Tony realized he had been spellbound, it was far too late. Green magic had swirled into his irises, drowning everything else out, and Loki snapped his fingers. His hand moved of its own accord, releasing a wide-eyed Steve Rogers. Trapped inside his body all over again, panic gripped his soul. Screaming was impossible; no words escaped his mouth and no movement bent to his will. Tony was a puppet, a goddamn Pinocchio dancing on Loki's strings.

"Allow me to demonstrate a simple possession." Loki introduced, giving a flourishing hand movement towards Iron Man. "This, dear mortals, is what turned your ally into your greatest enemy. I'm sure you're familiar with the process, Barton. No need to gawk."

Not-Tony fired a repulsor blast just inches away from Natasha's head, singeing a single red hair. Loki gestured her way and Tony was walking, taking off his helmet and letting it fall to the ground. Natasha watched as Tony reached for her holster, taking the gun from her hip and loading the chamber. Loki's duplicates were gone, but she didn't seem to notice; Loki's magic had been redirected into Tony, who now kept her attention captive.

"I could kill you all without raising a finger." Loki pushed the boundaries of Steve's shock and Tony raised a gun to the assassin's head, just a word away from blasting her brains all over the wall. "Or I could kill him."

Then the barrel was against his temple and the room was as silent as the grave. When his point was made abundantly clear, Loki relieved them of their stress.

"Put the gun down, Stark."

Tony obeyed, dropping the weapon to the floor. It clattered at his feet and he scooped his helmet back up, righting it into place.

"He was a puppet then, as he is now." Loki pressed his point home, striding over towards his new toy. "If you still fail to believe this, assess your video footage." He snapped his fingers and the suit's face-plate snapped down, the eyes glowing a startling green instead of white. "The suit and the man are one."

The silence spread on for ages, horrified Avengers looking on the form of their forsaken ally. Within himself, Tony was fighting through the anxiety to witness this, but his bitterness faded only in fractions. What was done was done - he had experienced betrayal and now it was over, and he bore the scars to prove it.

Loki whispered a foreign word and the magic vanished, leaving Iron Man to collapse to his knees. Gasping for breath within the suit, Tony wrestled the helmet off and let it roll to the ground, feeling raw and empty inside. As blue swam back into his watering eyes he managed to gather himself, slowly rising. He thought he might be glad to see guilt on the faces of his friends, but it just felt like a kick to the stomach.

"Furthermore, the crime you accused him of committing did not take place." Loki didn't care that
the ice was thin. He walked straight up to Steve Rogers and went toe-to-toe with him, a challenge in his green eyes. "Bring me the body of Odinson and I will reveal to you the truth in this grand lie."

"How do we know it wasn't you?" Hawkeye stood to his right, arrow ready and raised.

Loki rolled his eyes, giving Clint a scathing look.

"I assure you, all of Asgard will confirm that I was safely stowed away in their dungeons during the time of these events. I was entirely incapable of meddling in your menial affairs." Green eyes slitted into warning. "And were I to kill Thor, I would have done so with my bare hands."

"Thor's body burned." Steve reported, his voice flat. "There's nothing to show you, even if we wanted to."

It was Steve's turn to receive Loki's glare.

"Lies do not become you, Captain. Do remember who you speak to." His attention turned to Natasha, who stood in still silence where she stood. "What of you, Romanoff? You know SHIELD's most intimate secrets. The wool is thick over Odin's eye, but I am not so blind. Tell me they haven't stolen away with the body of my brother."

Her lips pursed into a line. "It is Thor's body. I saw it myself."

"You saw the lie. The illusion."

He stepped away from Steve. In a blink of an eye, Thor's godly hand landed on Tony's shoulder, clapping him in a friendly gesture. Loki had seamlessly taken on the form of their dearly departed, not a hair on his head amiss or a falseness to his smile.

"Comrades! Shield-brethren! Let us not waste the day in discord; we shall feast in the halls of Asgard, partaking in the spoils of glory." He spoke in the same voice, with the same thundering enthusiasm of the man they had known. "We shall talk until the earliest light of morn, when the mead has made our tongues free and our footsteps unguided."

Green flashed in the room and Loki had retaken his own form, his past amusement replaced by a grim look.

"Need you any more persuasion?"

Steve was as pale as death. Tony almost felt bad for him. Captain America was as God-fearing as they came, with a religion that had been shaken one too many times in this past year. Seeing the dead reborn couldn't be doing any good for his psyche. It was added insult to injury for the team leader to realize that he had turned against one of his own.

Natasha and Clint were far more put together, now standing side by side. Tony looked to them and Clint averted his gaze, embarrassed. They'd been in similar boats, but one had gotten friends in a time of need and the other hadn't.

"...Two days." Natasha said, breaking the uneasy silence, "We'll be back with the body in two days."

The assassins took their leave, abandoning Steve.

"Tony-"
Tony shook his head, holding a hand up.

"Not now, Steve."

"I'm-"

"Leave." The word came out quick and harsh, but Tony refused to feel bad about it. After all he had been through, Captain America deserved a lot more than a few short words.

Admitting defeat, Steve would retreat up the stairs. Tony watched him go, conflicted, but forced it away. Loki's eyes remained on him as he went to the dais to get out of the suit, feeling so very tired.

"Now the real battle begins, Stark." Loki reminded, picking up his drink from the table and emptying the glass. "Take haste in finding your true allies."

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to leave constructive criticism in your comments. I want to make this story the best that I can, and reviews are the way you can help me do that. Thank you for reading!
Chapter 5

Tony Stark was used to betrayal.

It was just a fact of life. It had started when Obadiah had hired the Ten Rings to kill him, but it hadn't ended when the Iron Monger had fallen into the oversized arc reactor. The scars that had been left behind had hardened Tony's heart against the world. He hadn't trusted easily to begin with, but now it was even harder to fall into his good graces. It took more than a smile and a smart mouth. It took blood and sacrifice, with a mind that could impress a genius.

That was why it hurt so damn much when the people he loved turned on him.

For as long as he could remember, he had been on his own. He preferred that. Functioning well with other people had always been a challenge because he couldn't understand them. Tony understood tech, because tech didn't change. He understood himself. But other people? People were weird. They acted on emotion instead of logic, and none of them ever seemed to understand how he saw the world. It was the curse of being a genius.

Those who could function around Tony and tolerate his social missteps were few and far between. That was exactly why he cared about them so much, even if he pretended not to.

He'd given Steve his trust. Which was stupid, he realized, because Steve hadn't given a damn. He had a hard-on for Howard, sure, but he had made his distaste for Tony clear since the beginning. A battle shouldn't have erased all the harsh words they had given each other.

Tony couldn't understand why he had ever bothered with Steve, now. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

What he did know was that now he could hold Loki, a murderer and criminal, in a higher opinion than Captain America. Yes, he couldn't trust either of them. But what he could trust was that Loki would always act in his own interest, no matter the circumstance. Loki was all about Loki just like Tony was all about Tony; it was something predictable. Relatable. Constant.

Tony Stark appreciated consistency.

But it didn't change the fact that having Loki in the workshop still felt downright wrong.

It had been a day since Natasha and Clint had left to go steal not-Thor's body from SHIELD, wherein Tony had gotten almost fifteen hours of sleep and Captain America had slept on the couch like a bad husband (betraying assholes didn't get to use the guest room). Loki had vanished for a time to do whatever the hell he wanted, returning shortly after Tony had started his breakfast-at-noon ritual. He'd been in the middle of wondering if the magician would come back when Loki popped up out of thin air and scared Tony so bad he'd almost choked on a pancake.

Now they were back in the workshop, where Tony was getting briefed on Loki's suspicions.

"Amora." He repeated the name, brow furrowed.

Loki nodded from across the worktable, hands splayed on top of the sleek glass. The blue light of the computer screen beneath glowed around his fingertips.

"An Enchantress. A friend, when times require it." he explained, "She is and has always been enamored with Thor."
Tony was skeptical. "If she wants in his pants, why make it look like I killed him?"

"If Thor is dead in the eyes of the universe, she can do whatever she pleases with him."

"Then how did she do it?" Tony challenged, shaking his head. "You were right next to me when you did your voodoo. You had to touch me."

Loki nodded. "Indeed." He glanced up to the ceiling, expectant. "JARVIS?"

"Mr. Stark has had no unauthorized visitors in the past six months, Sir."

"Sir?" Tony snapped. It was creepy how well his AI and Loki got along. It was like they were running on the same wavelength. "I'm Sir."

"Am I detecting jealousy, Sir?"

"Don't sass me, JARVIS."

Loki endured this odd conversation between man and machine in silence, paying it little mind.

"And of his authorized visitors?" Loki inquired. "Any visiting women of fair hair and skin, preferably within forty-eight hours prior to the incident in New York."

"Interested in my one night stands?" Tony gave him a look.

Loki's gaze was patient, but intense. "Amora is known for her magic, but more so for her beauty. If she seduced you, I have no doubt she wove her spell while your defenses were down."

"I've found a woman of that description in my security footage."

JARVIS reported, "Shall I bring up the recording?"

Tony nodded. "Skip the fun stuff, though."

The worktable hummed to life, projecting the security footage in hologram form between them. A dim-lit bedroom in the Avengers Tower appeared, where two sleeping forms were spread out between tangled sheets. Tony slept face down, mostly covered, with arms wrapped about his pillow instead of his guest. That second, smaller form was elegantly laid out in the darkness, her blonde head propped up on hand and elbow. She was watching Tony sleep, a thin smile gracing her lips.

"Amora." Loki identified. "Your choice in bed partners is astounding, Stark."

Tony shot him a glare through the hologram, but Loki was paying him no mind. On the screen, Amora had extended her hand and placed her fingers to Tony's temple, just as Loki had the day before. Foreign words spilled from her lips, too quiet to be recorded.

"Sir, I apologize. I had processed her action as an intimate gesture."

Tony shook his head with a sigh, stepping back from the table.

"Don't sweat it, buddy. She got us both." He absentely scratched at the seam where his arc reactor met skin. She could have done more than magic if she had wanted to. "Get all the information you can from this. Do the research. Check in with me at the end of the hour."

The hologram flickered away. Loki straightened and stood back, eyes on Tony.

"She will have gone into hiding with him."
"So we find her." Tony said, leaning back onto the table. "We search the whole fucking world until we find the hole she's burrowed in."

He tapped on the tabletop screen and a holographic globe was projected, lazily spinning on its axis. They both watched it for a long while before Loki shook his head, letting out a soft sigh.

"Your scope is far too limited." He advised. "Think bigger."

Tony raised a brow. "How much bigger?"

"Realms." Loki erased the globe with a flick of his wrist, motioning for Tony to come about the table. "This is far grander than your small planet, Stark."

As Tony rounded the table's corner, the lights dimmed in the workshop. A green glow was left behind in the darkness to illuminate them, the shimmering source coming from within Loki's cupped hands. He held an unnatural fire that danced in his palms, which cast light that bounced off the gold embellishments of his armor. Its green and white flames reflected bright in their eyes as it began to grow, encouraged by the spellcaster's will. It began to radiate with an energy that flooded the room and crawled underneath Tony's skin, sending a chill through him. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

When Loki released his grasp on this power, it exploded in a burst of white light, sending a million diamond fragments to every corner of the workshop. An entire universe began to swirl into view around them, these magic droplets forming a map of complex galaxies and stars that were suspended in the darkness around them. Arms outstretched, Loki would coax each puzzle piece into place with only a few movements of his fingers, the green of his eyes now a burning emerald. When his magic settled, everything stilled, and the stars cast a faint white light over the pair of them.

Tony was breathless. It was like a hologram, but so much more exciting. It was beautiful. He was fascinated, his hand reaching out to touch a raindrop galaxy that hung in the air next to his face. It was hot to the touch, but did not burn.

"The Nine Realms." Loki introduced, letting his arms glide down to his sides.

In the center of his masterpiece, these distinct worlds were displayed. Loki moved to stand beside them, watching Tony approach in his curiosity.

"She could be in any of these realms. Some more likely than others."

The display was tiered, with three layers of orbiting planets. The uppermost contained three worlds, the middle four, and the bottom two. Tony recognized Earth's familiar appearance in the middle of it all as he reached out to touch it. His fingertips brushed over Asia.

"All right." Tony nodded, managing to focus. "What's your thought?"

Loki tilted his head momentarily, perplexed, as if he had not expected this question. But his eyes moved back to the realms only a second later, the moment gone.

"It is unlikely she is on Asgard. The risk of discovery would be too high." He waved his hand through an uppermost planet, which dimmed. "Muspelheim is home of demons; her enemies are too great in number for her to safely reside there. And Niflheim..." He paused, pensive as he looked upon a lower realm. "Hell is-"

"Hell, as in heaven and hell?"
"Do not interrupt. Niffleheim is the land of the dead, known to most by the name of its ruler. It is different from the place you speak of, but the same. An Asgardian afterlife is in Valhalla, or in Hel." Loki shook his head decidedly and the realm dimmed. "She would not dare reside among the fallen."

"Six left, then." Tony crossed his arms over his chest, not one for talk on afterlives and Gods.

"Alfheim, Nidavellir, Svartalfheim, Vanaheim, and Jotunheim, to be precise."

"Gesundheit."
Loki ignored him. He circled the realms, thoughtful.

"Traveling to them isn't impossible without the Bifrost, but it is not easy. I will search the less likely realms while you prepare."

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. If Loki thought he was about to miss out on inter-dimensional, multi-planet adventuring, he had another thing coming.

"Prepare for what, exactly?"

"Whatever is necessary." Loki said, his eyes fixated on one of the worlds. "You will need to construct a suit appropriate for otherworldly conditions."

The lights in the room began to rise again, breaking the serenity of Loki's illusion. Tony watched with mild disappointment as the galaxies and stars began to fade around them, the nine realms wisping away like smoke when Loki stepped through them.

"You expect me to help you." Tony said, his throat dry. "Why should I?"

"I do not expect you to help me, Stark. I do not seek aid from others. What I expect is for you to help yourself."

An uneasy silence passed between them and Loki stopped at Tony's computer, reading over the files of research that JARVIS had begun to turn out. Tony's lips pressed into a thin line. He didn't like how normal this was all beginning to feel.

"Why are you doing this?"

The question hung in the air between them. Loki didn't make the slightest movement to indicate acknowledgement, but after a long moment he did turn back towards Tony. He was entirely unamused, jade eyes lidded with annoyance.

"You doubt me."

"Hell yes I do."

It only took Loki a few strides to clear the distance between them. Tony backed away by fractions, but his back hit the worktable and then Loki was there, looming over him. Damn, he was tall. To see eye-to-eye, Loki had to bend.

"Your mistrust is understandable." His hands moved to either side of Tony, gripping the edge of the table. He trapped the man between his own body and his work. "If we are to retrieve Thor, we must put our unpleasantries behind us."

Tony silently cursed, taking a sharp breath in. They were too close. Without the suit he was
vulnerable, outmatched by a God, and Loki was taking advantage of it.

"For the time being, you must not see me as your enemy." He continued, green eyes intent. "We are allies, Anthony Stark, bound by a common goal. Without you, I would not be free of Asgard's prison. Without me, your head would have been claimed by the executioner."

"You didn't care that I was in jail. I was an opportunity."

"As was I." Loki pointed out. "We used each other for our own interests. So long as our interests are the same, you have nothing to fear." His lips curved in a subtle grin, as if he had noticed something others could not see. "I do not seek your trust, Anthony. What I want is very simple: Thor returned, and Amora dead."

"Why?"

Slowly, Loki pulled away. Tony remembered to start breathing again as Loki offered his cryptic answer.

"I do not take kindly to people touching my things."

That Tony could understand.

"Then let's get to work."

Making a suit capable of deep space travel would take time, after all, and JARVIS was still cranking out files on Amora. Loki began to throw more of the research away than what he read, but Tony didn't care. Loki's wealth of knowledge would cut down the time they wasted on her.

He had just started work on the Mark XLII, blowtorch in hand, when JARVIS broke their focused silence.

"Sir, Mrs. Potts has arrived."

By the time Tony pushed up the protective face mask, Pepper was already there. She stood on the other side of the broken glass wall, staring at him like he wasn't real. Tony looked her over twice, unable to help himself. Her hair hung loose and framed a face without makeup. There was no tablet or clipboard clutched in her hands. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a too-large Metallica t-shirt. His shirt.

She was the prettiest damn thing he'd seen in ages.

"I told you I'd be fine." He cracked a smile.

Then she hit his chest with full force, knocking the breath straight out of him. He caught her in his arms, laughing breathlessly, and kissed her forehead as he tossed aside the welding mask.

"Pep."

She pulled back, touching his face. Her fingers ran over the sharp edges of his goatee, a faint smile on her lips. There were tears in her eyes.

"I can't believe it."

"Ye of little faith." He faked offense and his hand ran over the curve of her shoulder. "I've been to jail plenty of times. It hasn't killed me yet." Gently, he pulled away. "Did the kids behave?"

"I was on my best behavior, I assure you."
Pepper laughed a little at the AI's response, wiping her eyes. She sank into Tony's seat at the worktable and he leaned against its edge, glancing over to the spot where Loki had been working. The Asgardian had vanished.

"Tell me what happened. Everything, from start to finish."

Tony took a deep breath, looking back to her and crossing his arms over his chest.

He told her.

The most entertaining part of being the story teller was that he got to watch all the reactions. They played across Pepper's face without restraint. Concern came first; she didn't like that he'd been thrown in a white-box cell and ignored. Horror followed next when he mentioned Loki, but the story with the pen made her roll her eyes and laugh.

Tony was glad to see her smile.

Overall, it seemed his story just concerned her. He knew why. Teaming up with Loki wouldn't sit well with anyone who had been around for New York. Yeah, it was insane, he admitted, but it had worked. He and Loki had sprung free and were around to tell the tale about it. A few people had gotten stabbed in the process, but hey. That was normal when Loki was around.

"...Tony." She had her judge-y eyes on.

"I know, I know." He held his hands up in front of him in surrender. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, right?"

"But those desperate times are over." She insisted, looking pointedly about for the missing Trickster. "Why is he still here?"

Tony's jaw set. "We have to find Thor."

"Find Thor?" Her brow furrowed. "Tony, Thor-"

"Loki says it's an illusion." He turned on his heel and pulled up files on his computer screen for her, featuring the Enchantress. "Caused by her."

Pepper scanned her eyes over the screen, lips pursed.

"Isn't that...?"

"Yeah. She kinda went all magic-y on me."

JARVIS brought up the security camera footage from earlier, relaying the few seconds of spell casting that a sleeping Tony had been victim of. When it was over, Pepper leaned forward, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. Tony continued on, waving away the video feed.

"Loki says she wants to get with Thor, but he's never been interested. Apparently staging his death and stealing the real him away was her first choice in wooing him. Would have gone for flowers, myself, or maybe some mead."

"So Thor is alive?" She was looking at him now, but she seemed wary. Unconvinced. "How do you know Loki isn't lying to you? That this isn't just some big scheme?"

"Barton and Romanoff are off fetching the body." He admitted quietly, grim. "Loki will undo the
illusion."

"And how do you know he's not just doing an illusion on top of Thor?" She pointed out, crossing her arms. "Tony, you can't trust him."

"I know, Pepper. Genius, and all?" He gave her a little smile. "I've got a back up plan. Always do. J, crack open the Rapunzel file."

She was skeptical, giving him "that face" again. When the file popped up on the screen, she looked, taken off guard by one of Tony Stark's dirty little secrets. Her mouth dropped open in horror.

"Tony."

Again, he held his hands up in surrender.

"You never know when you're going to need some Asgardian DNA." He defended himself. "It's just one hair, Pep, c'mon. An illusion doesn't have a genetic code. I can test it myself."

Throwing her hands up in both frustration and horror, Pepper Potts stomped out of the workshop just like old times.

Tony chuckled. Now this was normal.

The next person to come see him was James Rhodes. Tony got him drunk enough that the Colonel completely forgot about his orders to apprehend his best friend, and they ended up upgrading War Machine - "I refuse to call any of my suits Iron Patriot, Rhodey. It's a goddamn international crime." - in a drunken stupor until the darkest hours of night. The Captain would appreciate the paint job, Tony thought, and then he decided to make it look more ridiculous by changing the chest light into a star shape.

Just as JARVIS was spraying on the final red, whites, and blues, Bruce Banner came down the stairs. James excused himself to the bathroom quickly and Tony cursed him. Yeah, leave him alone with the Hulk, sure, he'd be fine. Especially now that Banner thought he was a murdering criminal.

Bruce looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. He was nervous as he approached Tony, but JARVIS spoke before either of them could.

"Before you say something you would regret, Sir, I approximate Dr. Banner spent one and a half month's time researching the New York incident in the interest of proving your innocence."

Tony looked to the ceiling, then back to the Avenger, shocked. There was JARVIS, always looking out for him.

"Just let me explain..." Bruce offered.

Only two minutes into this conversation, Tony's assumptions were shot down and his tenseness washed away in a flood of guilt. Bruce had been on his side all along. The beautiful bastard had been championing for him when he'd been tossed under the Asgardian bus. He'd been petitioning to get him back home, campaigning his innocence, pissing off Steve and Fury, making sure Pepper was taken care of, and he had even hid the spare arc reactors kept outside the lab from dirty thieving hands when people had searched his house up and down for Stark specialty tech (goddamn warrants).
When Tony learned SHIELD headquarters had faced a full blown Code Green when Fury had managed to grab the remains of Mark V from Avengers HQ, he decided that no one was a better man that Bruce Banner. Who cared if the Other Guy had smashed the stolen suit into pieces in one big green fist; he'd been a damn good friend, and Tony had doubted him. He felt a like a dirty hypocrite.

Tony forced Bruce to hug it out after that, relief surging over him. He did have one other person in his corner, and a damn good one too. He felt like shit for ever doubting him.

So the drunken pair added a buzzed plus one. Bruce didn't drink much, but that was mostly because a drunk Hulk would be as terrifying as it would be hilarious. Tony egged him on (much to Rhodey's horror), but he was resolute in staying mostly sober.

Eventually, Rhodey passed out in a chair, half his body slung over DUM-E. Tony and Bruce opened up the new Mark XLII files once he did, and started to tackle science like old times.

Steve Rogers stayed upstairs.
Chapter 6

Tony had just finished making all the suit pieces for the Mark XLII, currently nicknamed "Badass," when a car came screeching into the garage portion of his workshop. He caught a glance of Clint in the drivers seat and cursed, pulling away from his work. He grumbled as he fished a fifty out of his pocket and thrust it at Bruce.

"Told you they'd make it on time." he smiled, taking the bill from him.

Two days, to the hour. The assassins had made it back right on time. Tony had been convinced it would take them longer, what with having to sneak a body as big as Thor's out of a high security place like SHIELD. He'd forgotten how damn good they were.

Clint jumped out of the front seat of the god-awful-gold minivan, sliding over the hood to open the passenger side door. Tony was about to make a quip about the stolen car's family decal on the back window when Natasha all but fell out of her seat.

She was thin and pale, with sweat on her brow and dark rings under her eyes. Her hands shook. Clint caught her before she tumbled from her seat, sweeping her into his arms. Striding forward and pushing all of suit pieces from the table to the workshop floor, ignoring Tony's curse of surprise, he lay his partner down. Bruce was at her side in an instant.

"What happened?"

Clint pulled out his knife, cutting open Natasha's skin suit at the hip. Pulling back the fabric, he revealed a grotesque wound of rotting skin and black mist. Literal mist, rising like smoke out of her wound. It was Loki's work from the group's less than peaceful reunion two day's prior. Bruce's eyes got wide.

"Shit."

Tony jumped over to his computer as quickly as he could.

"JARVIS, scan her."

"Results already complete, Sir."

DUM-E rolled up to Bruce with a medical kit as JARVIS' readings came up on the screen. Whatever magic Loki had blasted her with had caused more than just a flesh wound. It was a disease, spreading slow, killing everything it touched. Cruelly and mercilessly, it was rotting her like a corpse - like some sort of twisted zombie virus.

"I'm not this kind of Doctor." Bruce protested lightly. "This is above my pay grade."

"Mine too, bud." Tony said, flipping through the readings on his screen. "Goddamn green bastard - not you, Bruce, sorry, the crazier one-"

Then he felt someone slam into him, rocketing him over his desk and through his projected computer screens. He hit the slammed into the table behind him and there was a weight pressing into him. Tony's hands and arms locked with Clint's, but Hawkeye managed to sucker punch him. He slid off the table and fell to the ground. Clint followed him down and pinned him against the floor.

"You and Loki started this-"
Tony didn't think. He acted.

Responding to the new computer chips installed in his forearms, a gauntlet from the suit-in-progress whirred to life and rocketed off the ground, flying their way. It took only a thought. This new suit was prehensile; the pieces attached independently to the user, operated through new nano-chip tech that turned thought into computer command. It was brilliant, if Tony did say so himself.

But it looked like brilliance needed some recalculations, because instead of attaching to his arm, the gauntlet punched Clint in the temple mid-sentence and threw him off Tony. Still, it worked. With Hawkeye down, he could roll to his feet, managing to notice just in time that the glove was boomeranging back. He threw his arm out so it could attach, and- oh, fuck, the thing nearly shattered every bone in his hand. Warm blood pooled inside the casing and Tony cursed.

Yeah, that definitely needed some re-calibration.

As Hawkeye got up to his feet, Tony held the repulsor beam ready. Silence stretched between assassin and engineer.

"Clint, stand down." Steve's voice interrupted the scuffle. "He's not your enemy,"

Captain America was standing at the workshop's entryway, looking like he hadn't slept well in days. Jeans and a white t-shirt looked strange on him, but they didn't detract from his soldier's stance. Steve Rogers was a military man, from the way he talked to the way he brushed his hair. His eyes found Tony and then glanced away, but he gave his once-friend a nod. Tony sharply turned his head away.

Slowly, Clint straightened out of his fighting pose. He tucked his knife away as his anger faded and Steve nodded, slowly crossing the workshop's threshold to see to Natasha. JARVIS must have relayed the events up to him.

Tony's gauntlet powered down, completely unlatching and falling off his arm once it did so. He inspected his personal damage now that his hand was free, greeted with a nice big gash cut into his middle finger that stretched down to the palm. The repulsor connections must have been loose, he grumbled to himself, and they proved to be sharp as hell.

Nursing his now-sore hand and wrapping a (mostly clean) rag around the bloody cut, Tony moved over to Bruce and DUM-E. The robot was hovering, not being much help at all; he shooed it away, standing next to the doctor.

"Anything?"

Banner shook his head, grim. Natasha was unconscious.

"This is magic. I don't think we could treat it if we tried."

Steve folded his arms, a calculating expression covering over the concern that flickered in his eyes. Grim, he brought his gaze back to Tony.

"Loki?"

He shook his head. "Not here."

Bruce touched the wound with gloved hands, carefully inspecting the rot. Fluids oozed forward, her skin marred with black veins. More black magic spilled forth.
"Jesus..." Steve stepped back, looking nauseous. "What is that?"

"That's fucked up, that's what it is." Tony said, forcing himself to lean forward and inspect it. "Gross."

Natasha began to shake, her breathing labored.

"She said it was healing." Clint sighed. "She wouldn't let anyone look at it."

"She lied. Spies tend to do that." Tony muttered. "If we can't get rid of it..."

"Cut it out." Steve offered grimly.

"That's some trench warfare shit." Clint protested. "'Don't touch-"

"Steve's right. It's just going to spread."

Still, Tony hesitated. Whatever this was had Loki's nasty name written all over it, and he hadn't seen the sorcerer since Pepper had showed up. Poking it with a metaphorical stick might only make it worse. Then again, leaving it alone might also kill her. Tony wasn't letting a second person die on his watch.

Very glad that he hadn't eaten anything today, he began to work. His fingers pried at her rotted skin, examining the damage, and black blood seeped out at his touch. Ignoring the smell, he cleared -- scooped -- away the mess, revealing skin that showed hints of red flesh. Places that hadn't been infected.

He felt nauseous, but that could be credited to the process. His hands were soon covered in black and grey fluids. He couldn't feel his fingers. It took only moments before he felt dizzy and was forced to step away, gripping the edge of the table.

"Tony." Bruce called out.

A fire erupted in his arms. He looked down to see that the black rot that was eating into Natasha had colored his hands. Every inch of skin that had made contact with hers was now infected, burning white-hot and fading into black and green. He lost his balance and swayed dangerously to the side; Steve reached out to catch him on instinct.

Tony fell into a leaner, smaller body and then there was a wonderfully cold hand on his arm, clamping around the infection with confidence. Something pressed against the arc reactor. Everything in his sight took on a green tint and ice chased the fire from his body, leaving him raw and ragged on the inside.

Loki let out a sigh, warm breath brushing over Tony's ear.

"Meddling in affairs far beyond you, I see."

Tony blinked and his world righted. He found himself staring directly into an ivory column of neck and swallowed, trying to gather what had happened. Black hair, the sharp curve of an angular jaw... There was a hand on his arm, gripped tight, and the other was on his chest, palm and fingers fanned out on top of the arc reactor.

He pulled away too quickly, but managed to catch himself on the edge of the work table when the dizziness returned. Loki's lips curled in amusement, his hand falling from the empty air where Tony's chest had been.
"She let it fester, then?" Loki asked archly, looking around Tony to see the assassin.

Clint yelled something absolutely profane, but Tony was still trying to gather himself. Leave it to Loki to pop up out of nowhere at the last damn second.

"What the hell is this?" He demanded, straightening up and inspecting his arm.

Loki turned to look at him. "Magic. You should recognize the trade."

Clint threw a punch, but Loki deflected with ease. He tilted his head and gave his former peer a look as he stumbled by, as if disappointed.

"Surely you know better by now, Barton. But in the spirit of a truce..."

He placed his hand on Natasha's wound, a green mist steaming from beneath his palm before anyone could protest. This seemed to gift his patient with good health, color returning to Natasha's face as her trembling faded. When he pulled his hand away from her side, perfect flesh lay beneath. The rot was gone.

"I have no intention of adding red to my ledger this day." He said with finality. "Let us tend to the false Thunder God."

Tony blinked, remembering what all this nonsense was really about. Thor.

Steve gathered Natasha in his arms and sat her down in a chair to rest while Loki parted from the group, starkly out of place when he was among them. He stalked over to the van and slid open the door; it groaned on its hinges with the force, rattling the car as a whole. Tony pointedly looked away from the scene, but his eyes wandered back to it despite his wishes.

Within the stolen vehicle lay the body of Thor Odinson, pale and lifeless. When he could see beyond his grief and shame, Tony could see it for what it really was: unnatural. It had been months since New York, but Thor's body was the same as the day he had fallen, if not paler. There was no decay. There were no gaunt cheeks or hollowed eye sockets. It was just Thor, as if he were asleep.

Tony found it was easier to look at him if he thought about it that way.

Loki lifted his brother into his arms, which was a strange sight. Thor and Loki were two very different sides of a coin. One was gold and larger than life, while the other was dark and meant for the shadows. If one was supposed to carry the other, it was not meant to be the younger carrying the older. But Loki did so without much difficulty, striding forward with an arm under Thor's knees and one supporting his shoulder blades.

Awkwardly hefting the body onto the worktable, Loki let out a thoughtful hum as Thor settled. Everyone was still and silent, grim in respect for death. In contrast, Loki smiled. Of course he was smiling.

"I do not know what will be revealed when the spell is unraveled." The sorcerer warned, striding to the head of the table. "Prepare yourselves, Avengers."

In the second that Loki looked away from his brother to move around the table, Tony plucked a hair from the Thunder God's head. He stepped away, muttering something incoherent when Bruce gave him a look and went to his computer. No one seemed to be paying him any attention as he slipped the brown hair into the scanner.

Tony's brow furrowed. Brown? Had he-
"Stark." Loki called him name, expectant. Tony turned to respond, shutting down the computer monitors as JARVIS analyzed away. The gaze he was met with was calm, magic swirling and restrained within their depths. Loki was waiting.

Tony took a deep breath, nodding.

With permission granted, Loki pressed his hands to the sides of Thor's head. His fingers weaved through loose strands of blond and stretched down a grey neck, brushing over the soft flesh of vulnerable skin. He let out a quiet breath and then something filled the room in a wave of cold, stilling everyone where they stood. The lights dimmed as they had when Loki had shown him the universe.

Tony closed his eyes just as Thor's body began to glow the same green as Loki's eyes.

"Sir, the DNA sample you provided does not match the Rapunzel file. But I do have another match." JARVIS reported in his earpiece.

A match. Another human being.

Even if Thor was alive, Tony had still killed someone.

Maybe it was a criminal, he hoped. JARVIS had access to all the criminal databases. If some poor sap from death row was Amora's victim, Tony's victim... Maybe that would be easier to swallow.

He inhaled sharply through the nose, keeping himself under control. No anxiety attacks today. Keep it together, he told himself. Everything with be fine, he lied. He hadn't betrayed anyone.

Loki let out a shuddering breath and Tony's eyes opened to see energy flash over Thor's body. The spell had broken, burned away by green flames dancing over Thor's skin. As the emerald in Loki's eyes dimmed back to green, these flames died. Silence was left in the wake of magic and then there was a resounding crack, echoing loud in everyone's ears.

Thor's body fractured like a broken shell, able to hold its form only for a heartbeat longer. Then it began to flake away on an unnatural wind, slowly at first, before it began to dissolve into ash and dust. It fell away to reveal the truth beneath the lie; a smaller form, dead and useless on the table, covered in the remains of the magic before.

"Oh my..." Loki hummed, as if he might have been impressed.

Steve and Bruce turned away. Clint cursed. Loki touched the body before him, turning her head one way and another with his hand on her chin.

Jane Foster was still and cold on the workshop table, all life long gone from her battered form.

Tony felt himself grow small as JARVIS confirmed the DNA results in his ear.

Tony holed himself up in his room after that and no one dared to bother him. His usual escape would be the workshop, but she was there, so he went upstairs and locked the doors behind him.

He took a shower, nearly scalding himself beneath the water. The burn was distantly distracting, leaving him in a literal and metaphorical haze. Reality slipped away as he scrubbed, meticulously cleaning himself of the workshop. It wasn't until the arc reactor started to overheat - to the touch, not its core - that he turned off the water.

It was no wonder that Thor hadn't fought back. Mjölnir hadn't come because he was she, and she
was just Jane against a superhero. Just-Jane, the astrophysicist, hadn't stood a chance against Iron Man.

Tony pressed his head against the marble wall of his shower, letting himself drip dry. He hadn't known Jane, not really - her research projects had been worth a read and he might have talked to her on the phone once, but they had never met. Engineers of his breed and astrophysicists of hers didn't cross paths often.

Until the Bifrost point, Jane and Tony had lived separate lives.

Tony blinked. He tipped his head back and pushed a hand through his hair, staring at a particularly deep vein in the marble.

Jane had been there at the Bifrost point to give him a solid slap across the face. It had left him speechless, confronted with her despair. Angry, tearful green eyes...

"JARVIS?" Tony called, trying not to hope, "Jane Foster's eye color."

"Brown, Sir."

Tony cursed and punched the wall. The cut on his hand split open and started to bleed again, but he didn't care.

Fuck Amora. Fuck her, damn Asgard, and screw everyone.

When he couldn't stand the chill in the air anymore, he stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel about his waist, turning himself to the mirror. Wiping away the remaining fog, he was met with a reflection of himself that he didn't like. Shame and sadness weren't good looks on Tony Stark. He preferred a charmed smirk, or even a drunken blush. Anything but this.

He shaved with a rigorous determination, making sure every line of his beard was sharp and crisp and absolutely perfect. But by the time that was done his determination had waned. Thoughts of Jane crept back and he focused on bandaging his torn hand. He pushed out the door as he did so and stepped out into his bedroom. The air was crisp, blowing in from the open balcony doors. It smelled like the ocean.

"Locking yourself in your quarters does you no favors."

To his credit, Tony managed to keep it together. Walking out of the shower half-naked to find Loki in his bedroom wasn't the most comforting situation.

"Security breach." He complained, keeping a hold on his towel.

Loki was standing on the balcony, back to the mansion and hands on the railing. The breeze rustled through his hair and pulled at the edges of his trench coat, which he didn't seem to mind. Tony slipped on a pair of sweats while the God was turned away, presumably distracted by the waves of the ocean.

"You would be a fool to let her distract you from our goal." Loki advised. "Whatever guilt you feel-"

"You know what? Just shut it." Tony grumbled, "She was Thor's girl and I killed her. I can't just act like it didn't happen."

Acting like things hadn't happened usually just ended up with him building more suits, but she as still down there on his worktable. He couldn't stand the sight of it, even though his hands itched to
Loki turned on his heel and stepped into the room. His eyes darted this way and that, examining the private quarters of the one infamous Tony Stark.

"Why do you insist on taking the blame for her when you refused to take the blame for Thor? Nothing has changed." Loki observed. "Her blood is worth far less than the Thunderer's."

"Everything is different." Tony made a face, aggravated. "Thor... Thor is Thor. A God with a magic hammer. Jane was just a scientist."

"You're a scientist, Stark."

"I'm a scientist with a weaponized suit of armor. She had what? A false identity?"

All the fear in Thor's eyes suddenly made sense. Feeling somewhat ill and a lot angry, Tony sat down on the edge of his bed. Loki paced near, stopping in front of him.

"You were spellbound."

Tony grit his teeth. Jaw set, he rubbed at his beard.

"I killed her."

At this, Loki rolled his eyes. He stepped away, examining Tony's things about the room. He took interest in the telescope near the windows, with its lens pointed towards the heavens. His long fingers ran over its length, carelessly moving it off its viewpoint.

"You've killed before. They once called you the Merchant of Death, did they not?"

Tony jolted. Son of a bitch.

"I am not."

"Deny. Refuse. I don't care." Loki murmured. "You need not justify your past to me."

Tony stood, fists at his sided. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I am Loki, of Asgard." his response was dry. "God of Lies. Of Mischief. Of Chaos."

"And I'm Tony fucking Stark. Billionaire. Genius. Iron Man." he snapped back, "Not the Merchant of Death and not your goddamn pawn, Loki. I made Iron Man to protect people and I'll be damned if an adopted kid with Daddy issues starts trying to play me."

Then Loki's hand was around Tony's neck and he was pressed against a wall, toes just able to brush the ground. They were far too close and anger burned through them both. One insult sparked against the last and they were both ready to fight, pent-up with old pains. The guy was strong - how did Tony always forget that? - and his grip was like steel, but a rightly timed knee to the abdomen was enough to get out of his grasp. Tony side-stepped away and Loki coughed out a laugh, half-stepping back.

"You would do well to remember who I am, Stark." When he righted his smile was devious and thirsty, fingers twitching at his side. "And remember how vulnerable you are."

"I don't need a suit." he said, "And I don't need you. Piss off."

"Oh, you don't need me?" Loki began to circle and Tony followed suit, carefully watching the
Trickster God. "Where would you be now without me? I imagine your head would be decorating a spike."

"Maybe. And maybe you'd still be rotting in that cell."

"You have a debt to pay."

"I don't owe you anything."

"A debt to Thor."

This quieted him. Loki took that split second of an opportunity to advance, his hand pressing against Tony's chest to ram him into the wall again. Tony's head bounced against the paint and Loki's palm pressed against the arc reactor. Tony grimaced, wondering if Loki knew exactly what it was. This time he didn't fight.

"You know the truth of it," the God whispered, "If you are so grieved with her death, accept it. Know your place and do what you seem so fond of doing: avenging." His fingers tensed around the edges of the reactor, hinting that he might know what pulling the device out could do. His other hand rest beside Tony's head, a knowing gleam to his eyes. "Harness this rage inside you, Stark. Use it. If you do not, you will fall, and you are useless if swallowed by the void."

After a silent, theatrical pause, Loki released him. Tony took a sharp breath in and shook his head, bewildered. Why did they always end up so close to each other?

God dammit, he was losing his mind.

"I get today to get drunk and stupid on my roof and forget about this for twelve hours." he bargained, running his fingers through his hair, "And you're going to join me."

Loki raised a brow, curious.

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are." Tony said, pulling on a black shirt from the floor.

To his surprise, Loki simply nodded. Tony nodded in return and they exited his room, gathering some of his better liquor and ascending up the stairs to his roof. Up there the ocean air was crisp and the waters lapped up against the cliffs below, reflecting the light of the falling sun. It was picturesque. Decievingly calm.

Planting himself on the edge of the roof and putting his legs over the edge, Tony opened the first bottle. Loki seated himself beside him, an unfamiliar flask in his hand.

"Hiding booze in that cloak?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Your native drink is... lacking."

"Yeah, Thor always complained about that."

Tony stared into the mouth of his bottle, his thumb running around the lip. Loki was quiet, gazing out over the ocean again. He always seemed to find something interesting to look at in the waves.

For a long time their silence stretched. Together they gazed out over the ocean, lost in thought as the tides shifted. The air was cold up here, but Tony didn't mind it much. Alcohol would keep him warm.
"Who do we drink to, Anthony?"

He took a deep breath, leaning back on one hand and holding his bottle towards Loki.

"To Jane. To Thor." At each name, Loki's look only soured. But Tony wasn't done. "And to you."

Now this got Loki's attention. He raised a brow, his expression expecting explanation.

"To you finding Amora so we can hang her pretty head on a wall."

Loki smirked, accepting the toast. "To you as well, then."

Their glasses clinked as they tapped together, and then God and man began to drink to each other.
There was a weight in the bed beside him.

Consciousness slowly came swimming back to Tony. His hand found his eyes and he rubbed sleep from their corners, yawning into the morning. Mumbling a question of the time to JARVIS, he immediately decided 6:32 AM was too early to wake up, and rolled over onto his stomach to nuzzle into the pillows again.

A deep, quiet voice cursed him for being so loud as he slipped back into sleep, and Tony was too far gone to think much about it.

Two short hours later, the tell-tale headache of a hangover woke him from his sleep. JARVIS was polite enough not to turn the lights on, instead leaving his windows tinted against the morning. With the 8 o’clock sun kept safely at bay, he pushed himself up to sit, rubbing at his head.

What had happened last night?

As he tried to sort it all out from the flashes of color and snippets of sound he remembered, he forced himself to his feet. When the dizziness passed, he took his habitual trek to the bathroom. Water on his face would help, he assured himself, as would a shave and a shower.

During this morning routine, the haze of his memories cleared; they had had drinks on the rooftop, telling war stories and laughing while a magic green fire staved off the cold...

"This is bigger than you imagine." Loki had said, eyes closed as his face turned up to bask in moonlight. "There are things I see unfit to reveal... But it will be clear in time. I cannot stop that."

Grumbling to himself, he stepped out of the shower and turned off the water. The God of Lies was lying about something. Big fucking surprise.

Tony stretched and exited the bathroom in nothing but a towel. It was time for coffee and a visit to the workshop once he got some decent clothes on. He'd clean off the tables and-

Oh.

He told himself he felt sick because of the hangover as he shoved his head through a shirt.

"Jay, is--"

"Ms. Foster's body was collected six hours ago, Sir."

Leave it to JARVIS to know what was on his mind. It was such a simple thing, but the AI seemed to know Tony much better than he should.

An echo of Loki's voice from the night prior came to him: "Your computerized butler may as well be sentient. As it stands, his is to you as I was to Thor."

Without the sibling rivalry and bad blood, Tony thought. Maybe it was an accurate comparison from before one of them had gone nuts and fallen off a rainbow, but Tony might never know. Loki wasn't exactly fond of reminiscing on Thor.

He stepped into a pair of worn pants, running a hand through his damp hair. It was time to stop thinking about dead people. He had a suit to build.
He turned towards the bed to grab his earpiece, absently scratching at the arc reactor as he leaned over the nightstand.

*Oh, shit.*

A memory hit him, striking out like a jilted lover. Someone had been in bed with him this morning, complaining in a haze of sleep. He’d ignored it then, far more focused on sleep, but now he could see it clearly: Loki, on one side of the bed, a sleeping mess of pale skin and dark hair. He was covered to the shoulders by soft blankets.

Schrodinger's God, Tony decided, both dressed and undressed beneath the sheets. A mystery - a paradox. He wasn’t about to try and find out the answer.

He had an odd feeling that the universe was actively working against his sanity.

"Daddy's home." Tony announced, entering the workshop. He immediately made his way to the bar fridge. "Anything I should know about last night, Jay?"

"You may wish to expand the parameters of your query."

He wanted to ask about the sleeping God in his bed, but he knew better than to open Pandora’s box before he had to. JARVIS seemed to know better, too. Cracking open a bottle of cheap beer - it was just that type of morning - Tony approached the worktable with a determination to build a suit and forget the world.

"Nevermind." he decided, pushing his hair back. "Let's get crackin'."

As Tony set in to work, JARVIS provided him a list of requirements that Loki had recommended for the new suit. Apparently, once Tony had passed out for the night, Loki had come down to the workshop to give his thoughts to JARVIS ("That's *not* important information to report?"). He had spent a good portion of the night mapping out the nine realms for Tony’s systems. It was called "Yggdrasil," loosely translated from Norse gibberish to "The Nine Realms." Tony was already set on renaming it; he had a strict rule about being able to pronounce what he called his tech.

As for the suit, Loki wanted it to be fit for deep space travel. That would include resistance to temperature extremes and an improved efficiency with energy use; easy enough goals, Tony thought. A galactic positioning service (ha, GPS) would come in just as handy, based off the Nine Realms map Loki had drawn up. They were simple requirements. Oddly too simple, but Tony didn’t question it. He was a little too busy readying the suit and deciding which weapons on it he wanted to beef up.

"*Perhaps you should focus on the oxygen dilemma first, Sir.***"

Tony quickly lost himself in his work.

Hours later, the thudding of his speakers calmed as his music was quieted. Though he was focused, a smirk tugged at his lips.

"Don't turn my music down, Pepper."

He pulled his arm out of a chest plate to see Pepper smiling at him through the glass. But it wasn’t a good smile - it was her behave-or-die smile - and Tony cursed under his breath.

Steve Rogers was with her, absently watching Pepper enter her biometrics code for the door. She
was pointedly ignoring Tony's glare, just like Steve was ignoring him. Why had he given her free access again?

"JARVIS, don't let 'em in."

"_Ms. Potts and I have decided that this encounter is for your own good, Sir._"

Tony stood appalled at his own AI, whom had decidedly turned against him. Maybe Loki was on to something with the whole setience thing.

"JARVIS, I swear to-- Oh, hey. Cap'. Pep'." His expression changed from open-mouthed shock to a false smile when Rogers stepped in the workshop (while Pepper abandoned him up the stairs, mind you). "Pep' wait- ah, uhm. Shit. Well, what's up? Kinda busy. Suit building and all, crazy Norse Gods--"

"Tony," Rogers thrust out a white paper bag between them. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, apparently as uncomfortable as Tony felt. "Pepper... She said you hadn't eaten."

A peace offering. Tony knew one when he saw one - he was kind of an expert in buying "I'm sorry" gifts. Despite his initial hesitation, he would take it from his former friend. A free lunch wasn't about to smooth this over, but he was hungry.

"What do you want?"

Rogers gathered himself, looking to Tony.

"I just... I wanted to say I was sorry. For what I said. For not believing you."

"Yeah, well. It's a little late." Tony put the bag on the table. "I get it, but... damn, man. If I were Barnes, or even Howard, for fuck's sake--"

"Don't," he snapped, a little frustrated, "I'm not- we're not-" He relaxed his fists, which had clenched at the mention of their names. "You've said it yourself, Tony. You're not your Father. And you definitely ain't Bucky."

Feeling the slightest twinge of guilt, Tony leaned back against his table.

"And... I guess you're not Pepper." At the Captain's furrowed brow, Tony elaborated. "I can't expect blind faith from anyone but her, can I? You don't know my shit even as half as well as she does."

Steve nodded, crossing his arms. He was grim. Remorseful.

"But we should have been like Bruce." he acknowledged. "We should have questioned, like him. Like Fury."

"Like Fury?" Tony laughed. "He's the fucker who beamed me up."

"Because he had to." Steve said, resolute. "He didn't want to."

"I'll believe that when pigs fly out my ass, Cap."

The old soldier gave a weary smile, sitting himself on a stool. He leaned forward and looked up to Tony, thoughtful.

"Can we call it done?" he wondered.
"No." Tony crossed his arms. "But we can duke it out another day. When Thor's around to watch from the sidelines and cheer us on in our 'glorious duel.'"

Steve gave a sad smirk, nodding.

"Sure."

There was a silence that followed, allowing awkwardness to creep between them. Tony glanced in on the contents of the bag Steve had brought.

"Schwarma, eh?" He glanced back up, unable to help himself. "As far as peace offerings go, that's pretty good. Alcohol is a better one, but I get it. Captain America can't be seen at a liquor store."

Steve shook his head in that disbelieving way. Only Tony could try and put an elephant under a rug and walk over it, rambling all the while.

"What with your all-American persona: upstanding citizen, patriotic leader--"

"Tony." His patience was admirable.

"--the perfect role model, religious Christian and moral values--"

"Tony."

"What?" He pushed himself up to sit on the worktable, digging out the food from the bottom of the grease stained bag.

"Tony, I'm sorry. Really."

For the moment, that would be enough.

An hour later, once Steve had left and Tony had worked just long enough to be back in his groove, Loki appeared. He was dressed as if he hadn't been sleeping the day away, his appearance a long-since mastered skill.

"Good morn'."

"Good afternoon, more like." Tony pointed out, still focused on his work.

There was silence after that. Sensing there was no conversation to be had, Loki began to look around the shop, examining Tony's progress. He didn't make a nuisance of himself, stepping away when he was satisfied. The bots followed him curiously as he paced about the workshop, humming and chirping to each other. When he ventured too close to something deemed important, Butterfingers would shove up against him until he stepped back. U might wheel in a circle around his legs at an awkward attempt at herding while DUM-E clipped his claw at his trenchcoat.

Tony's stolen glances had him smiling like a proud parent.

When Loki grew tired of the guard bots, he returned to Tony's side and watched him work over his shoulder.

"You seem oddly calm, Stark."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Tony shot back, maybe too quickly. He tried to cover it up. "Did you divulge your deepest secrets? My silence can be bought with coffee, food, or a disgustingly large sum of money."
Loki gave a quiet chuckle.

"If I had, you would be long gone from this place."

There was a hand on Tony's shoulder then, cool and slender fingers brushing close to bare skin. It was enough to make the hair on the back of his neck stand straight up, but he didn't move away from the contact.

"Trying to work." he reminded.

Loki made a noncommittal sound in response, not moving away in the slightest.

"You are uneasy." he observed, hand squeezing his shoulder. "Tense. A furrowed brow beaded with sweat..." he chuckled. "Does waking in bed next to me disturb you so?"

Tony finally jerked away, the rolling stool allowing him to launch himself a foot or two away down the table. Loki's straightened up at the waist, amused.

"Well?" he inquired.

"What the fuck, man." Tony cursed, "Whatever I did, whatever we did--"

"Which was nothing." Loki said, a terrible smirk stretching his lips. "My, my, Stark, how presumptuous. You were not taken advantage of, I assure you."

At first he was relieved, but then Tony found himself somewhat insulted. Him, taken advantage of? No, that was not Iron Man's game.

"My tastes are far more refined." he continued, folding his hands behind his back.

"Whatever." Tony grumbled, running his fingers through his hair. "Why the fuck were you in my bed, anyway?"

"You insisted upon it." Loki said, as if that explained everything. "Nothing more."

It was then that he spotted the remnants of Steve's peace offering on the table, and his long fingers poked at the bag.

"Has this meager display moved you so easily?" he muttered, smile fading away.

Ah, there it was. Tony could see the hook and bait Loki was dangling before his eyes, and he'd be damned if he bit it... But he did anyway.

"Spying on me, Sleeping Beauty?" Tony grunted. He stood from his chair and snatched up a gauntlet he had left nearby, slipping it on his hand.

"The Captain betrayed you." Loki ignored his last comment. "And yet there you were, ready to forgive him."

Based on his tone, disgust was the appropriate term to describe Loki's opinion on forgiveness.

"I know what he did." Tony snapped, taking a seat and picking up a screwdriver. He began attaching the armor plating back on the glove, methodically concealing all the technology he had been tinkering with earlier in the day. "But he didn't have the whole story, either."

"Sentiment." Loki cursed, cold, "They handed you to your executioner, but your favor is bought
with sweet words?" He shot him a scathing look. "Perhaps that should be expected. I sought your death not a year past and now you seem to trust me."

Tony twisted in a screw a little too hard and his tool jumped out of the grooves, skating across the red metal. "What do you know about betrayal?"

"The same as you." Loki responded, "And I also know that your little team is your greatest weakness. Caring for them, weighing yourself down with sentiment, and abiding to your team's ever-changing guidelines and morals; all of it will be your downfall, because it makes you so very predictable."

"We-" he shook his head, putting the screwdriver down. "I can't go this alone."

"They deemed you rogue. There is no trust to be shared."

"And I'm supposed to trust you instead?"

A long moment passed in silence. Tony flexed his hand, testing the feeling of the glove's dexterity, and the repulsor powered up with a whine. Loki's eyes fell on its glow, but Tony let it shut down before a threat could be implied.

"I haven't forgiven their bullshit. But I already used my second chance ages ago, and I didn't deserve it then. Why beg for a third?" He shook his head. "Who are you to talk, anyway? 'Friends make you weak,' but that's got to apply to siblings too. And you get testy when Thor is-"

A flurry of movement and, oh - this was just getting routine now. Tony stuck between Loki and a hard place, with a cool hand wrapped around his neck.

"And I'm the predictable one?"

Tony's smile was sharp. He wiggled his fingers against Loki's chest, reminding him of the gauntlet.

Loki's face twisted into disgust, but whether it was for himself or for his opponent was unclear. He gave Tony one final press into the back of the chair before releasing him, taking a few strides away.

"I don't trust easy." Tony admitted, rubbing his neck. "And the last people I'm trusting are those two SHIELD kiddies and that star-spangled-ass upstairs. But Bruce, Pepper, and Rhodey? They've earned it." He picked up his tools again. "You, though?"

Loki turned to face him again, intrigued. He tilted his chin up, as if to welcome this line of questioning, and his lips curled into the faintest smile.

"Me, what?" he inquired. "Have I earned your trust?"

"You think you deserve it?"

"I would ask if you've a right to mine."

Tony lazily gestured the point of his screwdriver Loki's way. "I asked first."

Loki considered this for a moment. He watched a nearby screen, where Thor's file was projected. It featured a candid shot of a younger Thor, where he smiled with a mouth full of food. Near it, surveillance video of him and his brother fighting on Stark Tower looped, the two twisted close with their weapons at each other's necks.
"You can trust my rage."

A chill went down Tony's spine, but he still managed to wonder at how long Loki had been sitting on a line like that.

"You are rage, Loki."

He was proud of himself for that response, and the God seemed to be too. It was terribly perceptive of him, and Loki was impressed. Almost.

"Then yes. Trust me." Loki nodded, looking away from his brother. "I will do the courtesy of trusting you, in return."
Tony was watching a blinking blue dot on the screen, puzzled.

What was Loki doing in London?

Butterfingers wheeled by with DUM-E close behind, both of them chirping and clicking angrily. The first bot had one of Barton's bows in his claw and was avidly protecting it from his superior. DUM-E had recently taken to hiding all the Avenger's prototype weapons, maybe to spite them or to keep them out of Tony's sight. Either way, Butterfingers had apparently been bribed or coerced by someone to undo all that DUM-E did. This parade happened at least three times a day.

"JARVIS." Tony sighed.

"I've tried, Sir, but they're quite adamant."

Four hours ago, before the arguing robots and GPS trackers, Loki had left for reconnaissance. Tony was to stay behind and finish work on the new suit while he "sought the paths" for traveling to other realms. Jotunheim, Vanaheim, and Svartalfheim - giants, almost-Asgardians, and creepy elves, respectively - were on his itinerary. Loki had allotted a day for each. When he came back, Tony would have to be done with the Mark XLII.

"Let us leave no stone unturned." Loki had said. Tony would slow him down as he was, and the suit was only half-finished.

In retaliation, Tony may have slipped a GPS tracker in that ridiculous leather jacket when no one was looking.

The blue dot blinked one last time before it disappeared. Tony frowned.

"Anything?"

"Connection has been lost, Sir."

Tony grumbled to himself. Guess his universal GPS wasn't so universal after all.

"All right. Mark it access point number one. Personal servers, please."

"Already done."

"That's why you're my favorite."

Tony flicked the screen away. Marking where Loki blipped off of Earth might help him pin point some portals, but it would only be practical if he knew where the other side was.

He returned to the Mark XLII files as his bots rolled by again. DUM-E had the bow, now, and Butterfingers had recruited U to his cause. This Civil War was unfolding quickly.

"Behave, children."

It should only take him one more caffeinated all-nighter to finish the suit, granted he could keep his pace up, and then he could run tests until Loki returned. If Tony could do anything under
Asgard was tired. Night had fallen over the city and the moons cast long shadows through the streets. Some lights flickered in homes and weary taverns, but Loki paid none of them any mind. He had a purpose here. So long as he remained unseen, it would be carried out in full.

He had come here under the pretense of traveling to other realms. This he would do, but there were more important things to attend to first. These were goals best kept private, as he had no interest in the opinions of others. He and Tony might share a wary alliance, but neither of them were foolish enough to believe they would not keep secrets from each other.

It did not take him long to traverse his city. He knew the streets as well as he knew his own magic. An hour passed and he moved from the outskirts of the capitol to the Palace Quarter, where he cloaked himself in the guise of the Einherjar. Walking into the palace was easy enough and soon he stood in the throne room - silent, disguised, and a terrible threat.

The throne sat empty. With no King there were no guards, and Loki stood alone before the highest seat of Asgard.

How easy it would be to take it. To walk up that staircase and place himself upon the throne again. Was he the heir, with Thor proclaimed dead? Was his birthright his once again?

But now was not the time. He could ignore the temptation with the knowledge that patience would bring him a sweeter victory.

He did not linger any longer in the throne room.

He took the stairs to the left and ascended to his Father's chambers. His Mother's chambers.

She would greet him with surprise, but warmth followed. The fates seemed to be acting in Loki's favor; the All-Father was fast asleep. It took only a few spells and a rushed welcome before they were standing out on the balcony, where Loki presented his case to her in quiet words.

"Loki."

She was chiding him, as if he were still a boy with dirt on his new shoes. He tempered his reaction and watched the stars while she took in his proposition. The magic they had cast shielded from eavesdroppers and spies, but he knew how ludicrous his plan was. It was treason. Frigga might understand, but she was still Queen.

"The gauntlet is not a toy." she insisted, crossing her arms and beginning a mother's worried pace. "You cannot come here after I-" she looked one way and the next, as if their magics would falter, "I helped you escape. I may be Queen, but I am not-"

"The Tesseract is in the vault." he interrupted, "My scepter remains on Earth and then there is the Aether. I know where it lies, Mother, and-"

"Loki!"

He ignored her shocked expression, frustrated. He was fully prepared for resistance, but he had no other choice. Preparation was the only way to face the oncoming war.

"You are right." He kept himself calm, voice mannered. "But this is no game. No trick. The gauntlet is not a toy, and neither are the weapons, but what options-"
"You are powerful enough to find and face Amora on your own." Frigga insisted, stopping in her pace. "You ask too much."

At this, Loki laughed. He couldn't help it.

"This is bigger than the Enchantress." He turned to the balcony, watching the sleeping city. "Come, Mother, really? She is more intelligent than this. Thor is an imbecile, but he has stood against my magic many times before. He is not easily... ah, persuaded in that manner."

Thor was relatively good at spotting magic when he wanted to. Illusions proved to be more difficult for him, but growing up with Loki had given him the experience necessary to anticipate magic attacks. Young mages liked to practice, and young warriors were equally earnest to battle. Chaos had followed in their wake before Frigga had put an end to fighting outside practice grounds.

"She is a pawn." Loki leaned against the handrail of the balcony, "Borrowing power from someone in exchange for her service."

"What of Thor, then?" Frigga came to stand at his side.

He looked away from her, rolling his eyes in the slightest.

"With the Enchantress, most likely."

"What happened?"

Loki stood straighter, folding his hands behind his back.

"Stark was ensnared in one of her spells. Persuaded by her beauty. She pulled his strings and he attacked Thor. At some point, the oaf was replaced with a substitute - his Lady Jane, cloaked in an illusion."

Frigga tensed. "And she...?"

"Expired."

A silence hung between them. Frigga sighed and closed her eyes, taking in the dire news. Loki wondered if she felt guilty. He certainly didn't, but she had always been more empathetic.

"...Then what is this, son?" she insisted, tired. "If you know the Enchantress' game, why do you hesitate? Why arm yourself?"

His lips pursed in a thin line.

"Because her allies don't care about Thor. They seek me."

Silence again. She took a quiet breath and he heard her turn to him, but he kept his eyes on the city. Not the sky - the city, where fires warmed hearths and songs drifted out from taverns. But then her hand was on his cheek and it took all he had to not turn away from it, so used to flinching away from contact after all these years away from home.

"Who comes for you, Loki?"

"A Mad Giant." he whispered, finally turning to her. "A want-to-be King from another galaxy on the other side of the Void."

Tenderly, he touched her hand, bringing it down from his face.
"Amora may have Thor now, but she stands at that villain's side. He will come to Midgard seeking the Tesseract and the scepter he bestowed upon me. Two stones for the Gauntlet. Who knows what others he may have?"

"Loki..."

"I bargained Midgard and his favor for the Tesseract. I lied to him - I failed him, he thinks. Mother..." He squeezed her hand. "If you ever loved me, you will do as I ask. Bring me them to me and I swear to you, no one will know. Not even the All-See."

They were guarded from him even now. It was Loki's favorite trick.

Frigga took his hand in her other as well, gazing over Asgard with a grim expression. She knew war. She knew the horrors.

"How can I be sure to trust you, Loki?" she asked, her voice quiet. "After all you have done."

He tried to believe her words did not hurt him. "You trusted me enough to free me from the dungeons."

"Yes, but..."

"He will come here now that Asgard lacks its crown prince." he interrupted. "He thinks I am here, locked away. He knows the Gauntlet is in the vaults."

_How_, her eyes said, but Loki continued on. They both knew the answer.

"Asgard will lay in ruins, Mother. Our army will be no match. Without that oaf and his hammer, without _me_, Asgard will fall."

"And you would fight?" she asked.

He paused, tense.

"Were it in my interests." he admitted. "Think on it: would you rather have such items in his hands, or in mine? He will take them from you if they remain in the vault. Scry into the future and see my truths."

They stood hand in hand, rustled by the night breeze.

"Swear it." Frigga decided, squeezing his hands. "Swear to me that you will come fight alongside your brother in times of need. That you will return the weapons once the threat has passed."

He grimaced, as if this might cause him the greatest pain. Asgard he could fight for, yes. He still saw himself on the throne. But to fight with Thor? He might fight to bring the oaf back from whatever beyond Amora had put him in, but that was only so he could bring him down himself.

"...I swear it, Mother. Upon your life."

It was a necessary sacrifice.

"Leave the Aether be." she compromised. "And I will retrieve the things you ask for."

He nodded, fighting away the grimace that thoughts of Thor brought.

"Thank you."
True sincerity from Loki was rare, but he was very much genuine in that moment.

Frigga shook her head, dropping his hands with a small sigh. She would be a woman of her word despite the unease in her stomach.

"Go now." she ordered. "Do as you told Stark and see to the other realms."

He furrowed his brow.

"How do you...?"

But she was gone before he could finish. His trick, he noted, but hers first. He should have expected as much. A mother would always watch her sons.

Steve continued to bring Tony lunch. Once it was Brooklyn-style pizza, another time it was hot dogs from a corner store, but today it was a disgustingly healthy sandwich. Tony had a sinking suspicion Pepper was behind it, but he didn't say anything as Steve came and left after the obligatory small talk.

People had begun to figure out Iron Man was back to stay - it was all over the news after he'd taken the Mark XLII out for it's first test run. His favorite headline was the front of the New York Times: a picture of himself streaking across the night sky, accompanied with the headline "IRON MAN: A MURDERER SET FREE?" Tony just kept inside when he wasn't in a suit, still a little weirded out that SHIELD wasn't at his door yet. Maybe Howard had put a clause somewhere in the charter that said they couldn't attack his prodigal son.

On the morning of the third day Loki had been gone, Tony finally finished the suit. The prehensile technology left something to be desired (bruises and cuts were normal), but that wasn't the important part. What was important was that it worked, and that it was fucking badass. His favorite suit to date, if he did say so himself. The silver, red, and gold paint was just the icing on the cake.

His reward would be a change of clothes and a shower while JARVIS ordered take-out breakfast from his favorite diner down the street.

What he didn't expect when he came down from his bedroom was to find the entire Avenger's team lounging in his kitchen and living room.

"Not a word!" Pepper announced. She was in the kitchen with Steve, making breakfast.

Natasha was sitting on his piano bench and leaning against the instrument, her hair tied up and a pair of sweats hanging low on her hips. If that sight wasn't perplexing enough, Clint was holding a bag of ice to his jaw and channel surfing on the flat screen. He had one sock on, no shirt, and looked pretty beaten down.

"Sparring on the roof." Bruce offered. He was sitting at the kitchen bar, taste-testing Pepper's eggs. She smacked his hand away from the pan. "She kicked him off the edge."

"I slipped!" Clint insisted. "My bow's been broken for months, the spare doesn't handle as well. Lay off."

"The paint's been chipped and a few screws are loose. It's not broken." Natasha pointed out.

"Broken!"
This was weird.

"Squatters." Tony accused. "Get the hell out of my house."

"Fury sent them. I told them they could stay." Pepper piped up, not at all fazed. "You didn't even notice they were here. Now come and get some food, you look awful."

He shrugged.

"Where's Loki?" Bruce asked.

"Fuck if I know," Tony said, taking a seat at the counter next to him. "Since when do you care about that?"

"Since he became our best bet at finding Thor." He cleaned his glasses and slipped them back on his face. "The Other Guy wants to know, too."

Tony snorted, taking a glass of orange juice from Steve.

"What am I, the housewife? All of you lounging while I work all day?"

"Like hell." Clint grumbled, glancing their way.

"Steve and Pepper are on media." Natasha reported. "Fury and Bruce handled the Fosters. Pre-rooftop, Clint and I were tracking Thor."

"They just got back." Pepper chimed in.

"We were going to have a team meeting." Steve started.

"Oh, I'm still part of those? I'm honored."

"Tony." Pepper chided.

"What?" he asked, grabbing a banana. "Don't give me that."

"-once you came up from your workshop." Steve finished, pretending he hadn't heard Tony or Pepper. "We want to help, Tony. But we'll only be effective if we have all the information."

Tony made a face as he unpeeled his banana.

"I don't know anything new. I will when Loki comes back."

"If he comes back." Clint butted in, giving him a look. "How do you know he didn't just piss off somewhere to scheme?"

"I don't." Tony said, taking a bite with a shrug. "Put a tracker on him, though. He's not on Earth."

Natasha gave an approving nod. Steve declined to make any comment, but Clint gave a short laugh.

"Bet he'll like that."

He stopped flipping channels and settled on a news station. It didn't take long for a woman wearing too much makeup to talk about Jane Foster having gone missing. They had footage of Fury on the Foster's doorstep.
"Turn that shit off, would you?" Tony grumbled, feeling his stomach sink.

A moment of continued coverage, then the channel changed in compliance. Another news station, this one talking about Tony. That he could handle. Media talk about him was all white noise at this point.

"Sir." JARVIS' voice, "Your transmitter has come back online."

"Where?" Tony called up, curious.

"New Mexico."

Steve looked up towards the ceiling, where he always assumed JARVIS was located.

"The Bifrost Point?"

"Indeed, Captain."

Natasha sauntered over to the couch, sitting next to Clint and folding her legs over his. She stole the remote to flip over to the house channel - JARVIS' channel - and looked over the map and it's little blue, blinking dot.

Pepper sighed. She opened her mouth to say something, but then suddenly Natasha and Clint were sitting straight up on the couch, the channel having changed of its own accord.

Shaking cameras from helicopters relayed an image of Loki, all green and gold, standing on top of Avenger's Tower in New York City. He had one hand wrapped around the lighting rod of the building as he leaned out, a vision of ominous power.

"Damn, King Kong." Clint cursed, and then everyone was standing around the television.

"Jarv?" Tony called out, voice all wary and worried at once.

"Transmitter location has moved. Working."

Loki was just standing there, leaning out over the city. A wicked grin spread over his lips as his eyes darted from one helicopter to the next, his free fingers twitching. But there was no magic. Maybe he was reminiscing. Maybe he was scheming.

Armed men were beginning to scale the tower in some misguided military advance. If Loki noticed them, Tony couldn't tell.

And then just like that, in a flash of green, the Trickster God was gone. The news stations scrambled for information - moments later, there was talk of a government building being infiltrated. Steve was straining to stay still; he wanted to go, to fight, to defend, but this was on the other side of the country. No one would be able to get there in time. Not even Iron Man.

After a few loops of repeated information, there seemed to be silence on the radio waves. The newscasters quickly had nothing to report.

And then the air was empty. Silence for an hour, while they all stood glued to the television screen. Journalists and newscasters repeated the same stories and reported potential sightings, but it was all empty. Just useless information repeated over and over.

"JARVIS, I need something." Tony ordered.

The GPS map came up on screen again, cutting off the droning media, and a blue dot blinked on
"Russia, Sir. Moscow." he reported. "But there are multiple reports of Loki around New York City as we speak."

"Duplicates." Steve guessed, wary. "He's creating a distraction."

Tony lowered himself onto the couch, leaning forward in his seat. Everyone stayed attentive to the little blue dot that was Loki, continents away from them, but that could only hold their focus so long. They turned the news back on. Steve handled a call from Director Fury. By the time night had fallen, the group fell into an uneasy rest. But then-

"Well, well." A flash of green light and a familiar voice came from just beside Tony, "I didn't know I would cause so much interest."

Loki placed his hands on the back of the couch, each resting on either side of Clint's head as he leaned forward, feigning interest in the television. Hawkeye immediately moved, spinning to stand and dropping into defensive stance with a knife drawn. Natasha was quick to follow suit, but her eyes were on Bruce - luckily, he was the farthest away from Loki, standing in the kitchen with Pepper at his side. He seemed calm, if not a little shaken; Loki chuckled to himself and the Captain side-stepped away from him in surprise.

Tony just looked at him. JARVIS requested his attention in his ear piece, but Tony ignored it for now.

"What the hell have you been doing?" he demanded.

"Retrieving something that belonged to me." Loki said. "Nothing more." He stood straight, facing his ally. "It has been three days, has it not? We must speak of what I've learned."

Tony didn't seem to hear the last part. What he did notice was that Loki's right shoulder armor was mangled and dented, his green outfit beneath stained with red. Bullet wound, he recognized. Sniper Rifle ammunition. Russian - 7.62x54mmR, maybe? (They hadn't called him the Merchant of Death for nothing.)

"You did that on purpose." Tony pointed an accusatory finger at the television, looping the footage from New York. "Everybody is getting up in arms, expecting you to attack again. We don't need that! And now you're inj-"

"Best they be ready for an attack, even if it isn't from whom they expect." Loki responded, smooth even as he interrupted. "I do only what is necessary, I assure you."

"Attack?" Steve said, jumping in on the conversation. "Who's attacking?"

"This does not concern you, Captain." Loki responded with a look of ice and daggers, but that was not enough to stay the soldier.

"It sounds like it does."

Loki sneered, opening his mouth to deliver a well-sharpened word.

"Yo, Copperfield," Tony cut in, stopping him as he saw Steve tense up. "What do you know about an attack? What about Amora? Thor?"

Loki paused, locked in a staring contest with Steve. He was weighing whether or not the battle would be worth it, no doubt. But then he took a step back and turned on his heel to face Tony.
"We must talk. In private." he repeated, gesturing towards the workshop. "After you."

Chapter End Notes

I'm back. Come talk to me on Tumblr.
"You wanted to talk. So talk." Tony demanded, walking backwards through his own workshop door as Loki descended the stairs. "But first, how the hell did you get yourself shot?"

Out of the sight lines of the Avengers, Loki gave a grunt, finally acknowledging his wound with a careful hand over his damaged armor. He tried to roll his shoulder, but could only cringe and hiss at the attempt.

"'Tis little mat--"

"'Tis but a scratch,' I'm sure." Tony snipped, his sarcasm dry. "Sit. Table. Now."

Loki leveled him a heavy glare through lidded eyes, but he was in too much pain to threaten a gruesome death. Ultimately, he would compromise, peeling off his coat as he eased himself down into a chair next to the worktable (not on the table, as Tony rudely demanded). He proceeded to become as still as stone, like he was some oddly placed statue. A bleeding statue that couldn't quite keep a hold on his labored breathing, but as cold as marble anyway.

Instead of commenting on how tense the so-called god was when he approached, Tony just batted Loki's hand away from the wound like he owned the damn place (technically, he did) and took a look at the damage. Loki only barely hid his flinch and Tony pretended not to see that either.

"Let's get this off."

It didn't take him long to figure out that Asgard's fashion sense was far less practical than Earth's. There was an obscene amount of leather straps and buckles attached to the shoulder plate and Tony couldn't tell one end from the other. His mouth twisted into a grimace. He didn't have time for this shit.

Glancing an opportunity and acting on a stupid, stupid whim, Tony channeled his very best Mr. Miyagi and darted for one of the daggers at Loki's waist. Loki noticed too late; he twisted oddly in an attempt to thwart the theft, but Tony already had the blade in hand, a dumb, shocked smile on his face. He couldn't help a short little laugh.

"Sorry." He wasn't sorry.

Then Tony was slicing through leather and prying away buckles, a touch of adrenaline in his veins. The armor fell away piece by golden piece and Loki could only awkwardly stretch his neck away from the mad man with a blade (which, for once, was not himself). If he had anything to say about having a dagger stolen from him, Tony was sure he'd be bitched out for it later.

The last piece of armor soon clamored to the ground, but there was no celebrating. After tugging a black tunic half off Loki, the wound he revealed was... Well, it was pretty fucked up. The bullet had blown a bloody, half-dollar sized hole straight through Loki's collarbone and shoulder joint, obliterating the space between arm and chest. Blood still oozed from the clotted masses of entry and exit, and Tony was proud of himself for keeping his breakfast down.

"Through and through, it looks like." He muttered, glancing at the red-black blood on his fingertips. It wasn't the right color, but Loki couldn't exactly be held to human standards. "That's... good?"
Loki glanced up at Tony, expectant. "Deal with it how you will. I do not intend to let it hinder me."

Tony gave a little snort, shaking his head. He wiped his hand on a rag.

"God or not, you still got shot. Hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?"

Loki raised a brow. "Do I detect sympathy? I would imagine your armor would render you impervious to such wounds."

DUM-E rolled up and Tony took the first aid kit from its outstretched claw. He shrugged. "Been shot at, never shot. But I imagine shrapnel to the chest feels, uhm, the same. Now shut up and let me work."

Loki was silent for a moment, thoughtful. His eyes glanced to the arc reactor, but they flicked away before Tony could notice.

"We still..." Tony poured a liberal amount of alcohol on the wound, causing Loki to hiss and grit his teeth in pain. "...have things to speak on, Anthony."

Tony made a face.

"Yeah, let's start with Russia-"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Was it not mere days ago you criticized me for spying?"

"Now we're even." Tony shot back. "What the fuck were you doing running around there? What happened to Spartheim-"

"Svartalfheim."

"Gesundheit." He pressed gauze to Loki's shoulder. "You were supposed to be planet-hopping, Loki, not dicking around in the snow."

"I visited the realms, as planned." Loki insisted, closing his eyes as Tony handled his shoulder. Iron Man definitely had no future as a healer. "Once those quests were completed, there were other pressing matters to attend to."

"Like getting sniped?"

"Yes, Stark. My entire purpose was to injure myself to inconvenience you."

Being on the receiving side of sarcasm wasn't nearly as fun. Ignoring the slightest pang of guilt, Tony frowned as he pulled out bandages.

"What did you learn?" he said, changing the subject.

"Much." Loki sighed. "And little, at the same time."

The remaining trickle of blood was staining white skin a sickening shade of black. Tony tried not to stare.

"Whoever told you riddles were cool is a liar." Loki's eyes went to the heavens in veiled exasperation. Tony pretended not to notice. "Is this about what you said on the roof? About this being bigger than I knew?"
Loki glanced over to him and exhaled, a slight amusement accompanying his exhaustion. "Impressive. I was under the assumption you had no recollection of that night-" Tony's hand slipped and a thumb jabbed the wound on accident. Loki cursed at him. "Would you kindly watch what you're doing?"

With a huff, Loki shrugged out of Tony's hold and took matters into his own hands. While attempting to tie his own bandages - and succeeding, the stubborn bastard - green energy arced between his fingertips and he was already casting spells. Tony cracked his knuckles as the fluorescent lights flickered green above his head. But Loki seemed no better off for exerting himself; he swayed dangerously to one side and caught himself on the table, blinking as he eased himself into a different chair.

"We can speak freely now." He seemed to have composed himself, the magic no longer dancing on his fingertips. With care, he pulled his tunic back into the proper place over his bandages and folded his hands together on the table in front of him.

Feeling the worst coming on, Tony moved for the mini-fridge.

"Sounds like this conversation needs a drink."

Loki gave the slightest laugh and nodded.

"If your alcoholism wasn't so convenient, I might warn you against it." Loki gladly accepted the glass of amber liquid when it was offered to him. This time, he didn't hesitate to drink. He knocked back the expensive scotch like it was nothing. Bastard.

He re-filled Loki's glass and took a swig of his own drink, letting its warmth run down his throat. It didn't soothe like it should. But that didn't stop him from sitting on the other side of the table, kicking his feet up onto the surface as he leaned back in his chair.

"Well?"

"I took a detour to Asgard."

Tony paused, drink stilling in his hand. His mouth opened to retort, but he couldn't find the right words quick enough. He settled for something simple instead of witty.

"Are you-?"

"Insane? Mad?" Loki offered, tone dry. "I thought that had been established."

"They could've thrown you back in those fucking dungeons."

"They didn't. My presence went unnoticed. I had a request to make of Mother."

Tony's brow furrowed.

"What's your Mom going to do? You already played that card. She busted our asses out."

Loki cast him a patient, tired gaze.

"Frigga is the Queen of Asgard and of the Nine Realms, Stark. Her resources are limitless. Do not doubt an invaluable ally because I call her Mother."

"She isn't our only ally, mama's boy." Tony pointed out, taking a drink and crossing his legs at the ankles. "But whatever. What'd you ask her for?"
A pause. Loki was choosing his word carefully.

"There is more at work here than Amora and her infatuations," he admitted, seemingly ignoring the question as his eyes drifted down to his glass. "My enemies are numerous and Amora saw an opportunity in aligning herself with them. If we are not prepared, they are like to overwhelm us." He drank, swallowed. "The Chitauri return."

 Silence. Tony's hand tightened on the glass he held, anxiety creeping into his chest.

"...I'm listening."

"My agreement with Thanos was that in return for the Tesseract, he would leave me to rule this little world. He would provide me with the means to conquer you: a weapon and an army." Loki explained. "His general bequeathed to me the scepter you saw. There is a stone embedded in its blade, which granted me the ability to lead the armies I was given. It also allowed me to enlist others into my care."

His care. Tony would bet half of Stark Industries that Clint would have something to say about that.

"Like Barton."

"Indeed. I enthralled your Clint Barton, Thor's Erik Selvig, and many others." Tony caught a glimpse of the past skating through Loki's eyes. "The stone is known as the Mind Stone. It is just as valuable as the Tesseract, and I was expected to return it upon my victory. It was made transparently clear that I wouldn't have a head upon my shoulders were I to disobey that order."

"But we beat you." Just like Loki had wanted.

"The Tesseract was lost to Asgard and the Mind Stone was lost to Midgard. Thanos was without his treasures and weaker for it. No doubt he seeks to have them returned and the whole universe knows. Amora is an opportunist. A convincing one."

Loki set his drink down, carefully rolling his bad shoulder. The lights flickered blue, then green.

"But I intend to cut their plans short."

"Sir." JARVIS' tone was in warning.

Loki snapped his fingers and a flare of dimensional magic burned on the table between them, tearing open reality long enough for Loki to summon his secrets from beyond. Tony cursed and pulled his feet down, but the green flames were already flickering and dying, leaving him unscorched.

"We have been entrusted with the means to stop them."

It didn't make immediate sense. There were two objects on the table shielded from sight by the dying fire. Tony opened his mouth in question, but then the flames died and so did his words. He was standing and his heart was in his throat. He had to remember to breathe.

"How did you...?" These were supposed to be locked away safe, so that exactly this couldn't happen.

"Mothers will do anything for their sons." Loki stood, ghosting around the table to stand at Tony's side. For an injured man, he moved too gracefully. "I will show you how they must be used. I will..."
use them myself. With them, we can finish this."

A careful hand came to touch Tony's jaw, guiding his eyes away from the weapons display.

"Can you weather the storm that shall come?"

With those long fingers against the fringe of his goatee, Tony found himself silenced again and it was disturbingly hard to think. Really hard. He should be mad about this, raging, but instead his lips parted in silence and he looked up at Loki. A thumb was brushing over his bottom lip and an odd warmth bloomed beneath his mess of a rib cage. Loki was a crazy son of a bitch.

Oh, *fuck*.

"Can you?" Tony managed back, fingertips brushing over the back of Loki's hand.

His wicked mouth twitched into half a smile. "What is life without a little... thunder?"

But this suddenly wasn't about thunder and war anymore. Loki had moved in close to Tony, his hand still on his face and the other on the table, and he was *leaning* in. Leaning over, a skyscraper in comparison, his shadow long enough to swallow him whole...

"Breathe, Stark."

He obeyed. Then Loki's hand on his jaw skated down his neck and over his shoulder, dragging down though a grease stain on his bicep. He paused just above the elbow, squeezing.

"Why?" Loki breathed, eyes intent upon Tony.

"Why what?" Tony blinked, keeping himself right. Six feet of tall and handsome wouldn't make him swoon like a school girl, no it wouldn't. But he couldn't pull his eyes from that column of white neck, which moved as Loki tilted his head.

"Why do you trust me?"

Fuck, he didn't know. He had never known. He knew he shouldn't.

"I don't."

Loki's lips curled into a smirk. "You are a terrible liar."

Then he parted fully, his hands falling away from Tony and leaving him standing. His oncoming panic attack had been chased away. At least there was that.

Tony swallowed, eyes retreating back to the blue omens of blood and agony that were so innocently displayed in his workshop. The Tesseract lay next to a familiar old scepter, both of their sapphire souls pulsing along with the steady beat of his heart. Tony and Loki were standing close enough for their arms to touch.

"There are six stones." Loki said, breaking the trance. "Forged by the Celestials, legends say. They may well be older than the universe itself." He side stepped behind Tony, strong hands guiding him to sit. "The Tesseract is known as the Space Stone. The scepter's gem is the Mind Stone. But..."

One hand slipped forward off of Tony's shoulder, brushing over his chest until his fingertips felt the grooves of the arc reactor. Tony felt his breath hitch. It took all his strength to keep his eyes forward.
"You managed to thwart it without so much as lifting a finger." Loki continued, his hand fanning out over the arc reactor. What was with all the touching? "Alone, the stones are weakened. They can be stopped, contained. But when brought together, the entire universe would fold beneath the wielder's will. That is why Thanos seeks them."

Tony took a deep breath.

"Then... I guess we can't let him have them, can we?"

"Indeed." There was a brush of cool lips against the back of his ear. "So it is our responsibility to take them upon ourselves, is it not?"

Tony let out a barking laugh to cover up a trembling breath. He spun himself in his chair to face Loki, standing so he wasn't so outmatched - and he still was, damn alien heights. Loki loomed over him, but that didn't take from his resolve. He could see the hunger in his partner's eyes, an old echo of wanting power. Of wanting everything. Tony knew that look.

"This isn't about magic fucking rocks, Loki."

"Perhaps." Loki didn't touch him this time, though they were close. "But the stones will guide the tides of this war."

"And what, when it's over, you'll skip off to some other realm with them? Or take over the world?"

Loki gave him a knowing look, green eyes glittering. Tony couldn't read him well enough to know if he had been right.

"Without them, Thor is lost and Jane Foster given no vengeance." he said smoothly, changing the course of the conversation. "Is it not your duty to avenge?"

Tony made a face. "I'm not an Avenger."

"Then see this through my eyes."

"What? Mine aren't good enough?"

Loki's lips pulled into a wicked grin.

"Avenger or not, you work in the interest of your 'common good'. But if you see the universe as I do, perhaps you will meet your true potential. This is not about your world, Stark. It never has been."

Tony's jaw set, but he declined to comment. Pick your fights, Obadiah had always said. He'd been a shitty guy in the end, but the advice still rang true.

He pulled away and interactive holograms flickered to life in the open space of his workshop, ready for his busy hands. He looked back to Loki for a long moment, before finally calling out to JARVIS.

"Team meeting." he declared. "Ten minutes. Pop some popcorn, J."

Loki stayed this time. That was a surprise.

The Tesseract and the scepter were conveniently vanished until it was time to reveal the big secret.
It would be dramatic, no doubt; Loki had a flare for theatricality that Tony could appreciate. The team came down to sit around one of the tables, unsuspecting and suspicious of the sorcerer. Pepper came with them, tablet in hand. She kept her CEO-cool but kept glancing to the dark figure in the corner, so Tony sat next to her. Aside from making her feel better, she was also less likely to stab him when shit hit the fan. It was a win-win.

Loki just leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, waiting. He was the paragon of cool and collected but Tony could see he was just itching to watch the chaos unfold. Typical.

It went about as well as one could expect.

At the end of it, the table was abandoned and Tony was standing with a Mark XLVII gauntlet on his hand for the sake of his own goddamn sanity, Bruce's eyes were an inhuman green, Steve was too close to his face (he smelled like soap and something distinctly American), and Clint was standing on his chair and yelling profanities. Natasha and Pepper were the only quiet ones, still sitting and staring at the weapons of mass destruction that had appeared in a display of green fire and black sparks moments before. Pepper looked vaguely nauseous. Natasha showed mild interest, her poker face just as effective as Iron Man's face plate.

Loki was standing at the opposite head of the table, having silently shifted out of his corner. Tony expected him to be watching the brawl-to-be and cackling like a mad man, but he wasn't. Instead, his eyes were passing between the women, watching them with open interest.

"What say you, Agent Romanoff?"

Pepper nearly jumped out of her skin, but Widow kept an impressive calm, folding her fingers into a shelf underneath her chin. Loki's voice had stalled the argument when Steve and Clint whipped back around to look at the table. He completely ignored them, his undivided attention now on the assassin he had addressed. She was watching the steady beat of the lights in the Tesseract and the scepter, considering them. Clint was tenser than before.

"...Necessary." she finally answered. "Dangerous, but necessary."

Like Loki, Tony thought.

"Nat, are you-" Natasha held up her hand to stop Clint, pushing her chair out to stand.

"We've done this before. And how did we beat him?" She jabbed a finger towards Loki. "With that." She pointed at the Tesseract.

"Actually, I think it was my trick with the nuke that stopped them. And a raging green smashing machine." Tony piped up, putting a hand on Bruce's shoulder as the man began to recollect himself.

Steve made a frustrated sound. "These are supposed to be in Asgard."

"As am I." Loki answered smoothly. "As is Stark. And yet here we all stand, Captain."

"This is our only chance, Rogers." Tony piped up. "They're coming back and they'll be prepared. But not for this."

"These aren't just some old weapons, Tony. If they fall into the wrong hands..." He shook his head. "We need to turn them over to SHIELD. It's the right thing to do."

Screw the right thing. This was about Thor and the entire goddamn world.
From the corner of his eye, Tony saw Pepper stand straight up, her brow furrowed in thought. She might break her tablet with a grip like that, but Tony was more concerned with whatever the hell she was trying to decide to do. Tablets were replaceable, but women like Pepper Potts didn't come around every day. She blinked and her expression changed. She was about to do something risky; Tony knew that look. He usually loved that look.

In the space of a heartbeat, her expression had moved from concern to her pristine, Stark-Industries-is-going-to-rock-your-world face. She was now the CEO that haunted Tony's nightmares and kind of turned him on. A bit. A lot.

"Mr. Odinson-"

"Laufeyson." Loki interrupted, his voice as smooth as oil in water. Tony didn't miss the edge to his tongue.

"Mr. Odinson." Pepper ignored his correction, polite as one could be. Loki's eyebrow arched in displeasure, but he said nothing and she didn't notice the warning in his gaze. She was too busy pulling something up on her tablet. "Am I correct to assume that these two items are currently the property of Odin and the royal throne of Asgard?"

"One is." He tilted his head in curiosity, fractions of his annoyance fading. "The other is mine."

"The Tesseract?" she asked, and Loki nodded. "Thor is considered the ambassador of Asgard on Earth. The voice of his Father, some would say."

Tony's and Loki's minds were whirring at a million miles a second. Pepper continued on after Loki nodded again in agreement.

"In his absence, we have no substitute. But you are the successor to his position in Asgard if he is missing, yes?"

Loki eyes gleamed bright. He was quick on the uptake. "In theory."

"Would I be correct in presuming that-?" He took a step towards her.

"Yes, Ms. Potts, I am the next in line for Odin's throne."

"Then as a Prince of Asgard, Mr. Odinson, are you authorizing a weapons transfer of the Tesseract and your scepter to Stark Industries?" Her pointed gaze told him exactly what his answer should be.

Suddenly, Tony felt very uncomfortable with the look Loki was giving Pepper.

"I suppose I am." He took one more step forward, closing the distance between them. She didn't even flinch as he towered over her, tilting his head down to stare into her eyes. "Yes, Ms. Potts, I am entrusting these weapons to the specialized care of Stark Industries. Do take care of them."

"You can't-" Steve's protest fell on deaf ears.
"It's been a pleasure doing business." Pepper extended her tablet towards Loki. In an instant, he was signing away things that were most definitely not his to give, but technically were.

Who was here to say that anything was wrong? Loki was still a Prince of Asgard, whether or not he actively claimed his family. It would take weeks for word to get back to Odin. There was a paper trail now and it said that Stark Industries exclusively owned the Tesseract and the shiny glowing stick of destiny. Pepper Potts owned the scariest weapons of mass destruction, and by extension, so did Tony. SHIELD couldn't get their grubby little hands on them unless they wanted to drown in paperwork or try their best agents against the scariest clique of super-humans ever.

Bruce looked a little green. Sick-green, not smash-things-green, so no one was too concerned. Natasha was still watching the magic dancing inside the Tesseract and Clint was glaring at the scepter like it might rear up and bite him. Steve Rogers was currently the mental equivalent of the eye of a storm. There would be a furious red, white, and blue hurricane barreling through the mansion soon enough. Hopefully it would stay contained to the gym.

"With business out of the way..." Loki muttered as Pepper returned to her seat, and he did not just smile and wink at her. "...The question still remains."

Steve was grinding his teeth to the point of breaking one of them. Tony pushed by, going to peer over Pepper's shoulder and pretend to look at her pretty new contract. He gave her an appreciative squeeze of the shoulder instead. She remained buried in work, but he saw the edge of her lips move in a small smile.

Loki leveled a patient gaze over the audience before him. "Will you stand beside us, Avengers?"

Us, Tony mused. Tony Stark and Loki standing together against the universe. That thought stretched through the quiet.

Natasha stood up, a perfect vision of gracefulness. She turned to Loki, looked him dead in the eye, and nodded.

"You double-cross us and I'll kill you in your sleep."

Then she was leaving the workshop and sauntering up the stairs. Tony was convinced she would make good on that threat.

There was a moment of silence and Clint cursed.

"I go where she goes."

He followed her out the door, mumbling to himself as he left. There was definitely a 'Stark,' an 'Iron Man,' and a few more choice words in that, but he would stand with them. Black Widow and Hawkeye were a team before anything else.

Bruce crumpled down into his seat, holding his curly hair in his hands. He was shaking his head. It took a moment before he straighten up right and cleaned his glasses.

"...If the Chitauri are coming, we'd be assembled anyway." he justified, putting his spectacles back on his nose and looking directly at Loki. "But the Other Guy still doesn't like you."

"Tell him the feeling is mutual."

Tony exhaled hard, falling into the chair next to Pepper. She glanced at him, sharing a look that said she felt just as insane as he did. He looked at his gauntlet and started poking at the manual.
releases, mentally congratulating himself that the thing hadn't nearly broken his hand this time.

Steve, the last man standing in this session of declaring loyalties, was glaring at Tony and Loki. But his anger was fading and his resolve slipped away. He just looked tired.

"I'll fight." He shook his head. "God damn it, Stark. I'll fight."

Tony nodded, looking up. He knew this wasn't easy for anyone.

"...Thanks, Steve."

"Don't mention it." He spit it out with an impressive dose of bitterness, storming out of the workshop with enough thunder to impress Thor.

*Go work it off, big guy.*

Tony sighed, staring at the Tesseract in front of him. Silence spread and Loki's hand came around the scepter, lifting it from the table with uneasy familiarity. He was lost in deep thought. Tony couldn't begin to imagine where that endless mind was wandering.

"Well." Pepper said, breaking the silence. "You owe me one hell of a vacation, Mr. Stark."

He smiled a little, reaching forward and picking up the Tesseract. Realizing he had never held it before, he began to toss it between his hands as if it was as insignificant as a Rubik's cube. It made the tips of his fingers tingle.

"You've got my cards, Ms. Potts. Bankrupt me. You deserve it."

"I recommend Greece." Loki offered out of the blue. "Santorini, to be specific."

Pepper blinked, looking up to him. Apparently at a loss for words, it took an expectant sidelong glance from the Asgardian to get her tongue working again.

"Thank you."

Ok, now that was just fucking weird.

Chapter End Notes

And now the fun begins.
That night after a quiet dinner, the decision had been made that the Avengers were shipping out to New York. They had to prepare for the worst. So two assassins, one soldier, and one gamma radiation specialist left in a quinjet under the cover of the darkness.

As the team flew away, Tony gave a final wave from the rooftop and then shoved his hands in his pockets. He couldn't help but think of his favorite one-eyed director as he watched the quinjet fly away, the SHIELD logo reflecting off the lights from his home.

"JARVIS, how much does Nick Fury want my head on a plate right now?"

"You are currently number ten on SHIELD's Most Wanted Criminals list. Are congratulations in order?"

Tony made a face. How insulting. He had to be more of a threat than number ten.

Internally groaning and moaning about double digits, he moved to go back down to his workshop. He was staying behind with Loki. They still had some planet-hopping to get to.

He rubbed his neck as he descended the stairs, quite in tune with all the aches and pains of his body. If the rings under his eyes had anything to say for it, the only place he should have been at this hour was in his bed. But maybe he could get a few more hours of work in after coffee.

"It has been approximately 44 hours since you last slept, Sir."

"Nagging me, now?" He took a detour into the kitchen.

"Ms. Potts expressed her concern."

"Mm-hm." He leaned against the counter, tapping the coffee machine with his finger. With a few clicks and chimes it was soon brewing coffee to his wishes. "Pepper isn't here."

She was probably boarding her flight to Greece right now, settling into first class. The generosity of Tony Stark's bank account was endless.

"Before she left, she expressed her concerns by putting a ten hour lockdown on the workshop."

Tony's brow twitched in more than a little irritation. He slapped his palm to the coffee machine to stop the brewing cycle, having used a little more force than needed as he glared at the building around him.

"She expressed it by putting a ten hour lockdown' - who owns this house, buddy?" he asked, annoyed.

"You do."

"And who gets to say when Tony Stark gets to work in his own goddamn workshop - No, wait, let me guess. I bet it's the guy named Tony Stark."

"Sir."
"No, it's all right, J, just let this woman run my life. Hey, here's an idea: let's let her schedule my meals, too, since she's got sleeping down. Maybe she can set my calendar, dress me-
"

"I was under the impression you used to pay her to do that."

"Shut up, JARVIS." Tony ran a hand over his face. Maybe he was tired. Maybe she was right.

Accepting defeat, Tony grumbled his whole way up the stairs, deciding he would never give Pepper administrator passwords again. She was probably smiling her pretty little head off about this at this very moment, sipping wine and going to Greece on his money. Maybe she meant the best, but micro-management was just as much of an enemy to Tony Stark as Amora was. Being sleep deprived only made him all the more ticked off about the situation.

Still, he knew Pepper wasn't going to be the only one on his case tonight. He had Loki to deal with, who would be wanting to leave soon. He could show up any moment demanding to depart, but Tony decided that he would just have to sit his pretty ass down and wait. There was one eccentric billionaire who was going to take a long, hot shower and then go the fuck to sleep. If Loki thought he could stop that, he was in for a rude awakening.

The bathroom was full of steam by the time he was done showering. Toweling off just enough that he wouldn't soak the sheets, he abandoned any thought of clothes and fell into the soft mound of pillows and blankets that waited for him. If heaven was real, it was right here in his bed...

...Or maybe he was in hell, because the dreams he had must have clawed their way out of the fiery inferno itself.

First it was Afghanistan. It had been a while since he had dreamed of water boarding and caves, when the the hole in his chest had been brand new and powered by a goddamn car battery. He had odd thoughts of blue lights and a box that said he had a heart, but then he was back in the cave in a suit that was too heavy. Gunshots, running down dirt halls-

*Don't waste your life.* Yinsen.

Then the arc reactor was gone. The hole in his chest was empty, a man he trusted was betraying him. Thoughts of Pepper passed by and then he was on a roof, holding on for dear life. She pressed a button and an oversized arc reactor blew a brand new hole in his life where Obadiah Stane had been. The man had been nothing less than a father to him and he had killed him, killed him...

It was a rainy day at home in New York. Obadiah was alive again, a sad face on his doorstep in a grey city. Police officers were with him. Teenage Tony Stark was in his sweats and a worn MIT t-shirt and it was late, late at night. Something was wrong.

*Son, I'm sorry*, Obadiah was telling him, but none of it mattered.

There had been a car accident and Howard was gone, Mom was gone, and they had left their son behind raw and ragged and crying; he was actually *crying*. A car accident. A fucking car accident.

He heard cars piling up on the street. Screeching tires on black top cried out and Iron Man was rocketing down to Earth, no longer seventeen, and he had all his fire power aimed for a crumpled form of blond and red on the ground. The sun was beating down on them. People were screaming. Tony was a mess of sweat and green eyes, throwing punches, trapped inside himself. The suit was firing off close-range projectiles. Thor wasn't moving. Why wasn't he moving?

Thor's face changed to Jane's. Tony screamed and nothing came out.
Then everything stopped. The heat of the sun was chased away by a cold that started on his brow and swept through his body, chasing out the images of the past. It wasn't long before he was just resting in the darkness, hovering in a comfortable place of sleep that he hadn't found in a very long time. But the images weren't kept at bay for long. They came swimming back through the black sea of sleep, flashes of familiar lights filling his mind.

"Mr. Stark." A woman.

The voice pulled him from the depths and he saw her sitting there at his workshop table, a perfect vision of health. She was actually sitting there, not lying cold on the surface, and she was smiling.

"Mr. Stark, can you hear me?"

Jane Foster watched him with kind patience, her hands folded in front of her. There was no blood and her eyes were clear of the tears he always imagined her with. She was just a scientist, alive and well, wearing white on white against the blues and chromes of his workshop.

"Sit."

He was moving at her offer, sitting like this was real. Like it was normal. They stared at each other from either side of the table.

"Ms. Foster-" he started.

"Jane."

"Jane." He tried to remember if he had even met her in real life. Maybe they had an exchanged an e-mail or two. He wasn't sure.

"Mr. Stark-

"Tony." He offered. She smiled and he realized why Thor had been such an idiot about this girl.

"Tony." Brown eyes met his. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Uh, do we?" He swallowed and forced himself to bring up reality. "You're dead, kid."

She laughed a little. "I'm aware. But I'm here now, aren't I?"

"It's just a dream."

"If you asked Thor, he would tell you that dreams mean more than we think they do."

Thor the optimist. Tony tipped a glass of scotch down his throat. He couldn't remember when he had gotten that either, but he didn't care. It tasted good.

"Pretend it isn't a dream." Jane suggested when her last comment didn't hit home. "If this wasn't a dream and it was just you and me, what would you say?"

Tony entertained the idea. Mulling over the thoughts in his mind - which felt so heavy, sluggish, not right - he decided on something to say.

"I'd tell you you're brilliant. Loved the paper on multi-dimensional rifts, by the way." She tilted her head in thanks. "You're too smart for Thor."

"He knows more than he lets on, Tony. Don't let him fool you."
One speculative brow rose. "I caught him trying to use a remote control as a phone, once."

Tony laughed a little. Jane did, too.

"Well, he figured out the toaster pretty quick." She looked at her hands, remembering something in fondness. "He used to text me while I was trying to sleep. Over and over and over, until Darcy took the phone away one day and told him to shove it."

"That phone is a masterpiece. I made it. Have you ever tried to design a cellphone to survive lightning? I don't think so." He leaned back, feeling drunk. He didn't think he was, but the softness of his vision said otherwise. When he went quiet for too long, Jane gently encouraged him to talk.

"Is that all, Tony?"

He took in a deep breath. It was just a dream, right? It didn't matter what he said.

"I'd say I'm sorry, I guess."

She waited for more, watching him. He shifted beneath her gaze.

"You got caught up in the crossfire. I... I fucked up."

"It wasn't you."

"The fuck it wasn't." He wasn't ready for forgiveness. "You're over because I got played. Because I couldn't keep it in my pants and she got into my head."

He took another, long drink. The glass was endless and if he already felt drunk, what was stopping him from drinking more?

"Do you want me to forgive you?"

Yes. He wanted to be forgiven. But he didn't think he deserved it.

*Don't waste your life*, Yinsen had said.

"Nothing will bring you back."

Maybe he would never be worthy.

"You're right, Tony." Jane answered, voice flat. "I will be dead and you will do what you need to do. You'll build. You'll kill things."

He cringed. She really could go toe-to-toe with the best of them.

"We got caught up in a mess." She was leaning forward over the table, forcing him to pay attention. "But you got out of it alive. Don't waste that, Tony."

Again. *Don't waste your life.*

He put the glass down.

"If you want to make it up to me, bring Thor home. I'll forgive you if you do that." Her request was quiet, but it spoke volumes in the hollows of Tony's soul. "And he will forgive you. Don't worry."
His mind was clearer. He met her gaze and felt all his guilt, but a fire was filling his chest and burning it out.

"It's not about me, anymore," Jane was saying, "It's about Thor." She might have smiled at him. "It's about Loki, too."

Tony's eyes widened in surprise and question, but it was all ending as quickly as it had started. The workshop was gone in a wave of black and the real world hit him like he'd taken Cap's shield to the chest, leaving him sitting straight up in bed, wide-eyed with a cold sweat pouring down his face. He was breathing hard and the sheets were tangled about him, caught up in his fists.

"Stark."

Loki's voice pulled him further into reality and he saw him standing on the balcony, back to him. It was still night. Or maybe it was the next night. Had he really slept an entire day? How long had Loki been standing there?

Tony didn't respond, a little too caught up in himself to form a proper sentence. There was nothing to say anyway, and Loki seemed content to give him the quiet he needed. So he focused on making sense of his mind while the dream was still vivid. A part of him didn't want to lose anything he had dreamt.

*You got out of it alive. Don't waste that, Tony.*

He cursed under his breath and threw off the mess of sheets that tied him to his bed. He paid no mind to his nudity as he stumbled forward and pulled on a pair of sweats, carelessly tugging a shirt on afterwards. Tony Stark was no blushing maid. If Loki wanted to see it all, all he had to do was turn around.

It wasn't until after Tony was dressed that Loki spared him a glance over the shoulder, as if he was expecting a fully suited Iron Man to stand ready to travel. When he was met with far less than that, his gaze turned back to the night ocean, which was as black as the dark pools in his eyes. Tony noticed the moon's absence as he came out on the balcony, but the stars were flickering in both the sky and sea. For a last look, this was a pretty good one.

Tony leaned forward on the rails with his eyes on the heavens. Loki's remained focused on the black waters below.

"You've rested long enough, Stark. It's time we depart."

Tony nodded. He took in the smell of the ocean salt to clear his mind, breathing deep. He wished life could be simple. His blood pressure would do better without nightmares and visions, and that was without mentioning his habit of rocketing through the skies in a mechanized suit, taking down bad guys. If he had the opportunity, though, he knew he wouldn't give it up for anything.

"I want to ask you a question, first."

Loki glanced to him, offering his curiosity. A quiet moment passed.

"Are you doing this for Thor, or for yourself?"

*It's about Thor,* she had said.

Immediately, Loki's expression tensed. His answer came only after some time of thought, once he had turned his eyes back to the expanse of the Pacific. His jaw worked beneath closed lips.
"I act in my own interest." His words were well chosen and precisely spoken. "It is currently in my interests that Thor is returned to his natural state."

*It's about Loki, too.*

The answer didn't sit right with Tony. It nearly screamed bullshit over the waves below.

"So you can kill him later, is that it?"

Loki's eyebrow twitched.

"You try my patience. What reason do you have to question me? What right?"

Tony just shrugged, looking back up to the stars. "It just seems like a lot of work for someone you're just gonna kill."

"Do not presume to understand." Loki snapped. "I have turned rivers red in the name of Thor. Cities and legacies have toppled, all for him. I do this because it must be done. Because if Thor's blood will run, it will be by my hand. No other's."

Tony gave him a look, but he turned away at the glare he received in response. He put his best self-preservation instincts to use and let the moment stretch, noting the constellations above to distract himself. He began to drum the railing with his fingers. The idle beat filled the silence and eventually Loki watched his fingertips tap against the metal. It was the sign he was safe to talk again. Good thing, because a new thought was eating at him.

"All right." Tony gave him a sidelong glance, weighing the odds on whether he would survive or not. "One more question."

"You are like to lose your tongue, Man of Iron."

"Well, if I don't ask now, I might not get the chance."

That was the hard truth of being a super-hero. He had learned to ask questions before, not after, because there might not be an after.

Loki expression paused somewhere between expectation and irritation. Tony considered his words one last time before he threw caution to the wind.

"What's with all the touching?" He looked him dead in the eye, not shying away from this confrontation. "The breathing down my freaking ear, watching me sleep. Asking why I trust you. I mean, you're sex on legs, Loki, but are you just fucking with me, or do you want to fuck me?"

He was painfully blatant. Nothing less could be expected from Tony Stark.

Loki gaze quickly shifted to surprise. Score one for Iron Man, Tony tallied, and zero for the Asgardian Prince. It wasn't every day he could take Loki off guard. Even so, it was only when Loki's stare began to bore holes into the side of his face that those pale, thin lips curled in amusement. Maybe he needed to re-evaluate the score.

"Does it trouble you?" A question was answered with a question and a cool hand predictably brushed up against his. "Are you appalled at my touch, Anthony Stark? You've always reacted otherwise."

"I just don't get it." Tony tried.
"What is there to 'get'?'\) Then there were hands on his hips, twisting him so that they were toe-to-toe with each other. "Have we not shared the same bed before?"

"Platonically." Tony pointed out quickly. He had the sudden thought that maybe Loki had lied to him about that.

Loki must have noticed, because the noncommittal hum he made in response didn't help ease Tony's worries. He was watching him shift under the revelation that maybe they had slept together, amusement glimmering in his green eyes. He was catching every minuscule expression that passed over Tony's face. When Loki decided to break the silence, it was a blessing.

"Why do you ask?"

Tony had to think carefully about his response. His eyes started to wander as he considered his answer, glancing over the layers of gleaming gold that Loki wore. He did his best to try and ignore the creeping thoughts of pale skin in the night, hot breath, bodies sliding between his sheets-

His eyes fell on a mended shoulder plate and his attention shifted, curiosity overriding any tangible response he had managed to string together.

"Is your shoulder healed?" He blurted out, expertly derailing the conversation. Good one.

Loki blinked in confusion, glancing down to the spot Tony's eyes were focused on. As smooth as ever, he nodded. If he was annoyed at his question being ignored, it didn't show.

"For the most part." He paused, thought, decided. "Would you like to see?"

Tony nodded. He didn't know why, but he did, and now Loki was pulling away and expertly unclasping buckles that Tony had only been able to cut through. His jacket fell to the ground in an unimpressive pile of green and black, followed by one piece of armor and then another. Before Tony knew it Loki was just down to the buckles of his breastplate, and that too was removed. It left him in a black tunic on black pants, strangely casual. His skin stood out against the night like snow on asphalt.

Then the shirt was gone too, discarded carelessly between them.

Well, shit.

Tony drank the sight in with one long look. He hadn't been lying. Loki was sex on legs, carved from alabaster like some Greek sex god. A Greek sex god that was standing on Tony Stark's freaking balcony like he owned the place. Maybe he did.

Tony forced his eyes to go to the wound on Loki's shoulder, ignoring the smirk. What should be a mess of angry, red skin was just a purple-blue bruise around a silver, pocketed scar. It was a small indentation and nothing else.

"As if it hadn't happened."

Tony hummed a response, reaching out and touching the bruise. If he weren't so used to Steve's healing factor, he might have actually been angry about this. Envious, really, but it was all old hat at this point. Maybe Loki would be more willing to be subject to tests.

"It still mends within." He warned, moving lightly underneath his touch.

Tony noted the injury and was a bit more gentle, but his interest was waning. His gaze
swept down Loki's chest, noting other silver scars and imagining what had happened. A man with an axe, maybe an arrow or two, an accident while brawling with a younger Thor... His hand bravely brushed over a scar on Loki's sternum.

Loki let him touch. Encouraged him, even. Moments blurred together and Tony was suddenly aware that he was dangerously distracted. He had to get it together.

Then there were lips pressed to his temple and he knew it was too late.

"Touch them." Warm breath danced across his face. Tony inhaled through his nose, letting himself be flooded with the smell of leather and clean skin. "Touch them all, Stark, I care not. But I expect recompense for your exploration."

"What do-"

Cool hands slipped underneath his shirt and Tony sucked in a breath, surprised. Fabric moved and suddenly foreign hands were tugging his shirt off his head, which was deposited among all the other clothes. Tony's bare chest was exposed to the night air and he felt it, but his immediate attention was on the pair of cool hands spread out on either side of the arc reactor.

"I, uh..."

Loki wasn't listening. He was looking at the device in his chest, wanting for the knowledge of it. The blue light washed up to touch his face, casting odd angles of shadow.

"It keeps you alive." he decided.

Tony swallowed. The cat was out of the bag; Loki knew the big secret.

"Electromagnet." he explained shortly, forgetting he should probably lie. "Metal shards in my chest. Keeps 'em from tearing through my heart."

"Hm." Loki traced a finger over the raised seam between flesh and metal.

Tony thought about reaching up and guiding his hand away, but then Loki was leaning down. There were lips on his collar bone, a hand slipping around to his lower back, and a tongue, and oh-

The night progressed far different than expected. Hungry hands explored the curves and folds of new bodies, nails biting into flesh the same as teeth. What remaining clothes they had were tossed haphazardly around the bed. Skin rubbed against skin, flesh rocked against flesh, and everything blurred together. It was a trainwreck. It was hot, it was dangerous, and it was everything Tony needed. It was everything Loki wanted.

Laying in post-coital glow, Tony stared up at his ceiling. Loki's arm was stretched out over his chest, his head on a neighboring pillow as his breath came and went at an easy, steady pace. He knew there were green eyes staring into his skull, but they were lazy at best. Whatever bloodlust that had once resided there was long gone.

Tony ran a hand through his hair. He wasn't the type of guy who got weird about taking someone to bed. His history was littered with nameless men and women who had filled his nights in the days before Iron Man, but this was different. This was Loki. Thor's brother, an enemy to Earth, and the poster boy for death and destruction and lies. He was a master manipulator - the master manipulator. His lies were weaved through history and Tony just couldn't get the thought out of his head that he had just been caught up in one.
He refused to be played again. Even if he and Loki went to hell and back together, Tony Stark would tear down the world before someone controlled him again.

"Do try not to think so hard." Loki propped himself up on one hand, elbow burrowing into his pillow. "You may hurt yourself."

Tony snorted, looking over to him.

"Shut it, Snow White." Loki’s lips were a little red from their activities, so the nickname fit. "I just slept with SHIELD's number two most wanted magical asshole. I'm allowed to have a crisis."

"Word choice." Loki advised with an amused grin. Then, a frown brought his eyebrows together. "Number two?"

"I'm number ten, so consider it a god damn compliment." Tony muttered. His tone was not without a little bit of bitterness, but Loki’s finger was tracing the arc reactor again. The reservations were slipping away. He could get used to this.

Just when he was beginning to nod off beneath the comforting circles Loki was drawing, that soft voice interrupted the quiet.

"Do not sleep. We have things to tend to."

"I would have to agree, Sir."

Tony's eyes snapped open. Loki was looking up at the ceiling with idle interest, a single brow arched. JARVIS spoke again before Tony could mouth off at him.

"You have a call from Captain Rogers. I told him you were otherwise occupied, but he insists that it is urgent."

Loki’s eyes traveled to Tony, expectant. The Avengers could have only just settled in.

"Fine. Put him through."

A pause. A chime to confirm the connection.

"Tony?" Steve’s voice.

"Miss me already?" He asked, folding one arm behind his head. Loki kissed his neck with a wry smile. Bastard.

"Tony, they're here."

Loki’s eyes snapped open wide and Tony was sitting up, untangling himself from his bed partner. Steve was still talking.

"They're just outside our air space. Huge ships-"

"JARVIS, television."

"Just hovering. They haven't deployed forces."

Television screens flickered to life, displaying the news station broadcasts in a series of boxes. Images showed alien warships hanging in the highest level of the atmosphere like a predator lying in wait. They were the same horde that had invaded New York before; space whales and airborne chariots, all manned with snarling, hive-minded aliens. They were muted to leave the speakers free
for Steve and Tony was out of bed, stepping into a pair of pants. Loki, however, remained. His attention was intently tied to the images on the screen.

"How much time do we have? What are they waiting for?" Tony barked, looking back to the television. JARVIS was projecting a live feed of civilian tweets.

"I don't know. They haven't made contact."

"They won't." There was a wash of green in his peripherals and then Loki was fully dressed, standing next to Tony with the scepter in hand. The horned helm had been brought out, including full battle armor. Shit. "Send your forces now. Do not delay. Attack while they are idle. Th-"

"What are they waiting for?" Tony snapped, pulling his shirt on. Loki shot him a glare that spoke volumes on his opinion of interruptions.

"What they wait for is their general, Stark. They wait for the one who has taken my place."

Silence over the comms.

Then it happened, and it happened fast. JARVIS' alarms all went off at once; red, flashing lights and sirens cut through the night and Tony cursed. He pulled his head through his shirt just in time to be met with blinding flood lights through his windows. Those definitely weren't part of his security system.

Burst of blue light followed gunshots. An explosion rattled down far below them. A woman was laughing and the silhouette of a huge man wielding an axe emerged through the blinding lights, airborne. He flew from beyond and crashed through the windows; Loki cursed and pushed Tony out of the way, sending him to the floor with a million fragments of glass. He caught the man's enormous forearms in his hands and they were like bulls locked at the horns, straining, until they disappeared in a flash of green. Tony fell hard on his side and a deafening crack rocked the foundation of his home.

He registered the world moving fast - moving sideways, down. The cliff face holding his mansion edge was sliding, breaking, and now Tony and everything he owned was falling with it.

They were attacking him in his own goddamn home. Trying to kill him in the wreckage.

The suit was already speeding his way, bursting through every wall and obstacle between him and the workshop. One gauntlet hit him first - his floor cracked and angled dangerously, sending him sliding straight for the ocean as he grabbed for anything to keep himself from falling - and then the leg braces and boots attached, clamping onto his calves. That was enough.

The rocket boosters initiated and he was streaking through the wreckage and into the skies, half-suited and peppered with bleeding cuts. He caught a glimpse of Loki on a roof that wasn't falling into the Pacific, in close combat with that huge maniac with an axe.

"You survived." A woman's voice rang out behind the bright lights that were now trained on him, blinding him without the mask. "But half a suit does little, Man of Iron."

Then there were gunshots and Tony dove down as quickly as he could, zig zagging to avoid blasts of blue plasma. He could barely see through the wind, so when the chest plate came to him he was unprepared. It sent him into a somersault as it attached and stretched around his torso, catching and tearing on the shirt he wore. One enemy shot found its target, hitting him square in the back, but the suit had clamped shut around him. It sent a pulse of pressure through him instead of burning a hole through his body.
"JARVIS!" The wind whipped away his voice.

With only one gauntlet, his steering was impaired. But when he righted himself he was like a star streaking through the sky, traveling up and up until he was back where he started, level with the attackers. Now out of the blinding flood lights, he could see them: five alien sky chariots, all with weapons aimed directly at him. The woman was their leader and she stood on her own vehicle, positioned at the center of attention and smiling sweetly. It was Amora.

Someone fired at him and he dodged, returning the gift with a well-aimed missile. They hadn't been expecting his suit to be functioning half-assembled, but now two chariots were on fire and corkscrewing down into the ocean below. Amora screamed something at him, but he was too busy aiming weapons at her face to hear it. He shot at her while she was still mid-sentence.

A flash of emerald and she was gone. Fucking magic.

Her entourage immediately began to flee, but Tony picked them out of the skies, watching them fall like flies in bursts of fire.

He was admiring his own handiwork when a yell from behind him rudely reminded him that the battle wasn't over. He turned to see the man with the axe get a good swing in on Loki, who narrowly missed. A few black hairs fell from his head.

He was flying in to help when the suit's helmet rocketed out from the ocean, leaving a trail of salt water in its wake as it traveled up. Tony met it with ease - "Late to the game, buddy." - and powered up a repulsor beam as he rocketed towards the skirmish. In seconds, he was skidding to a halt on the roof, his gloved hand held up and glowing as the face plate snapped down to join the rest of the suit.

"Hey, ugly!" Not his best insult, but the guy looked and that was all that mattered. Tony beaned him straight in the head with a bolt of pure, white energy with the biggest smile he could manage, sending the idiot flying off the edge. The axe clattered down somewhere in the distance.

When it was clear that he wasn't getting back up, Loki straightened. He looked to Tony with nothing short of annoyance.

"I was handling that."

"Yeah, and getting a hair cut in the process." Tony snapped back, flipping up the face plate. He was still missing his other glove. "Who was that?"

"Skurge. Amora's personal body guard." He glanced to the skies where she had been. "I assume she fled."

Tony nodded. Only partially listening to JARVIS list off the suit's status, he looked down to his exposed arm and flexed his bare hand. One of the gauntlets must have gotten caught up in all the damage. That was just great.

"Well, if the axe murderer is fried, we have to get to the others." He shook his head. "I'll need to stop at the tower first to-"

"Unnecessary." Loki thrust something out to him. "Here."

Tony stared at the offering. There was his missing glove, held firmly in Loki's hand.

"It was damaged."
"It doesn't look damaged." Tony said, taking it up for an inspection.

Loki watched him with mild annoyance. "Be grateful I retrieved it."

"But that guy just came out of-"

"Do not question it." He was more annoyed now. "Your cities are under attack and this is your priority? Interrogating me? Magic is my tool, Stark. Take it and be grateful."

He was right. Now wasn't the time to fuss, even if this didn't feel right.

"Fine."

Tony took the gauntlet, fixing it on. Once it clicked into place with the arm piece the suit whirred in happy completion. Iron Man was in the game and ready to knock some skulls.

"Current battery levels and reserves are not sufficient enough to complete a flight from Malibu to New York City, S-"

A pale hand suddenly slammed the face plate down and Tony barked in protest, JARVIS glitched, and the world went black and green. All Tony could see was garbled sensor readings as Loki pulled him through a dimensional tear of green fire and magic.

Chapter End Notes

A thank you to ancientwinters, my beta/editor, for helping me battle this chapter. It was a long one.
So much for a plan.

That was the thought that flickered through Tony's mind as he was swallowed up by green flames, Loki's hand clamped firmly around his forearm. The one fabled bitch to rule them all had delivered herself to his door with a fucking bow on top, putting all their plans to shit. Now he had no idea where he was going or what he was doing and Loki was at the proverbial steering wheel while his former army floated over New York City.

It was something of a blessing when they skidded back into reality. Loki let go of his arm and Tony reoriented himself with a shake of his head, taking in the skyline around them.

New York City was on fire around Avengers Tower. They had fallen back into the real world on the balcony, and the Chitauri were in full assault on the city. People were screaming. Buildings were falling. It was happening all over again, but it was so much worse this time.

"Patching you into the Avengers communication lines now, Sir. Running diagnostics on the suit as we speak."

This wasn't an attack powered by a portal. This time the enemy had been forced to come all the way to Earth with their army. While the same airborne chariots darted through the skies and the whale-like Leviathans roamed above the streets, a new problem had presented itself: the mothership. Tony had seen her before, when he'd thrown a nuke straight at her face; she was a terrible four-armed beast of machinery that now hovered above the city like the hand of God. Her parasitic children bled from her sides like locusts.

Loki stared at her the same as Tony did, perhaps more acquainted with the ship than he. His eyes were slitted, calculating.

"There," he said, eyes darting to the heart of the monstrosity. "She's here."

Tony looked and JARVIS zoomed in the screens, allowing him to see what Loki had spotted. Sure enough, Amora hadn't run - she was at the helm of her army, gorgeous and terrifying with all her power behind her.

So much for planet-hopping. It was a home game now and Tony was a little disappointed.

"Time to bring out the big guns, yeah?"

Loki's response was to summon the scepter, which appeared in his hand with a wash of magic. The battle transformed his demeanor and he was akin to a snake, fangs bared in a wicked grin and waiting to strike at unsuspecting prey. When a sky chariot came too close, carrying two screaming Chitauri, he lashed out. They fell in a blaze of blue fire.

"I will take the scepter." Loki decided, leaning over the balcony edge to watch his foe's continued fall. "They may still be susceptible to its influence. You would do best to utilize the Tesseract."

He straightened and turn to face Tony, pulling the Tesseract into existence with a flourish of his hands. In the suit, Tony's brow pulled together.
"And what am I supposed to do with the shiny blue cube of death? I don't know how to use it."

Loki rolled his eyes, gesturing for Tony to hold out his hand.

"I invite you to be creative. It is not said that you are known for your ingenuity?"

With an appreciative eyebrow raised for the flattery, Tony knew he couldn't turn down a good challenge. He held his hand out.

"I'm also known for bad ideas."

Loki chuckled and let the weapon fall from his fingers, but it never found its place in the suit's metal palm. Instead, the cube lost shape; it imploded like a dying star, hovering above his hand in a display of white hot energy. Tony's eyes widened and he looked to Loki for answers, but the God of Chaos was just smiling.

"Stark?!" Steve's voice over the intercom. JARVIS had linked them up. "Is that you?"

The Tesseract, or what had been the Tesseract, finally fell. It hit the suit and exploded in tendrils of blue energy that climbed up his arm, seeping in and weaving through the suit's mechanics with a pulse of power. Tony thought he felt his heart murmur.

"Power capacity at five hundred percent and climbing." JARVIS told him.

"Power." Loki was saying, watching him with a gleam in his eyes. "Endless power, all in one little cube. Yours for the taking."

Many said, including Tony himself, that he and the suit were one. Now the Tesseract had joined the equation and Tony's eyes were blazing a brilliant blue.

"How about that." He smiled a wicked grin. Loki would have been proud to see it.

"Not to interrupt,..." A 3D model of the suit appeared in the HUD and flashed red at the left hand and forearm. "...but I am detecting an absence of or a malfunction in the left forearm and repulsor."

Tony frowned, testing the repulsor with a ill-aimed shot to the sky. He managed to nick a chariot and send it veering off its path and straight into a building.

"Seems to be working fine. Check the sensors." He twisted his wrist and moved fingers to test the suit joints. Everything was functioning. "How about waking up the wonder twins while you're at it?"

"Remotely activating the Mark Six and Seven now. Estimated time of arrival is one minute and thirty-three seconds. Who might pilot them?"

"Can you?"

There was a pregnant pause, as if JARVIS was bewildered by the suggestion.

"My Iron Man capabilities are limited to assistance only."

"Then activate emergency protocol tango eight hundred." A few messages popped up on the HUD, indicating JARVIS was following instructions. In mere moments, the spare suits were flying themselves. "Make Daddy proud."

"If you're quite ready," Loki interrupted, cracking his neck. "We must rendezvous with your
"If you're quite ready," Loki interrupted, cracking his neck. "We must rendezvous with your Avengers."

Anticipating Tony's command, JARVIS had already located the team and was calculating the most efficient flight paths to reach them. Captain America and Black Widow were in close combat with a group of Chitauri about six blocks away; Hawkeye was perched up on a roof nearby and the Hulk was smashing skulls near Grand Central Station.

"Down there." Tony pointed. "Hold on, Prince Charming."

Before Loki could protest, Tony had a hand hooked around his arm and they rocketed off into the air in a flash of red and green. Something obscene was being yelled at him in response, but Loki was dutifully picking aliens off out of the sky while he complained. It was an impressive display of multi-tasking and blue fire that lasted until they dropped down into the Captain's fight.

"Stark!" Natasha wasn't calling a greeting. She was aiming a gun directly at Tony's head, and he dropped down fast; Loki vanished with a spark of green. One shot later and a Chitauri bled out on the street behind him.

Steve was just a few feet away, facing off two larger aliens. They had him cornered against an overturned car and a third enemy was sneaking up behind the vehicle, poised to put a spear through Captain America's back. Tony called out and had guns at the ready, but then Loki was standing on top of the Prius, his scepter's blade speared through the Chitauri's helm and skull.

Oh, yeah, Tony remembered, aliens bled purple. Gross.

Steve rammed one of the attackers in front of him with his shield, but it rammed back like a bull, forcing the Captain into a defensive position. Natasha took it down with a shot to the temple and Tony got the other one in the neck with an exploding bullet. Loki made a face when the resulting spray of blood coated one of the tails of his duster. Steve had been mercifully spared of the same shower by his shield.

"About time." Clint jogged up to join them, a smear of alien blood across his forehead and in his hair. He stopped and scraped unknown flesh off his boot. "'Otherwise occupied' my ass. And since when do your suits drive themselves?"

As if on cue, the Mark VII was streaking through the sky above them, shooting down enemy soldiers who got too close for JARVIS' liking. Tony shrugged.

"JARVIS got a little excited, is all."

Clint looked concerned, staring at the self-piloted suit in the sky. Loki jumped off the car he was standing on to join them, sharing a simple nod with the Captain once he straightened up. Steve looked a little put-off that he had just been saved by an old enemy.

Yeah, Tony knew how that felt.

"So what's the game, Cap?" he asked. Loki came to stand at his side.

"We have to get control of the situation." Steve wiped the blood off his shield as the massive, raging, green figure of the Hulk came barreling out a window twelve stories up, punching aircrafts out of the sky and smashing pilots into old brick walls across the way. "As you can see, our green friend is taking matters into his own hands."

Tony snorted as he watched Bruce Banner's anger management therapy in action.

"We think this is their entire fleet." Steve continued, "Amora's on the mothership - Clint spotted
her, and she just keeps sending 'em. If it's like last time, we need to cut off their connection to it
to her. But we'd have to get up there, first, and we can't leave the streets unprotected."

"If I may." Loki interrupted. "Amora is not to be underestimated. She sends these pawn soldiers to
begin her war and wear your abilities thin. What will come next will be meant to put you in your
graves."

"If you have a better idea, say it." Steve requested. "We're kind of on a schedule."

Loki spun the scepter in his hand. Clint gave it a sidelong glance. 

"The Chitauri are not an intelligent army. They are blind soldiers with weapons, who fear not for
their lives. Defeating them would best be done with finesse. They cannot preempt anything but
actions of brute combat." Loki looked to Natasha. "Agent Romanoff, are you capable of
infiltrating the mothership?"

She nodded, reloading her weapons. "If you tell me what to do once I'm in."

There was a pause as Steve and Clint considered the fact that they were actually desperate enough
to follow Loki's advice. Natasha and Tony didn't seem to have a problem with it, or were just far
too numb to odd circumstance to care. 

"Stark." Steve nodded, coming to terms with the situation, "Can you get her close?"

The opportune moment for an innuendo was not lost on Tony, but he respected (and feared)
Natasha too much to do anything but nod. Meanwhile, she held out a spare ear piece to Loki and
he lodged the technology in with care, having to maneuver it underneath his horned helm to fit in
his ear. 

"All right." The Captain took command of the situation at hand, proving himself a true soldier
through and through yet again. "Romanoff and Stark, you're in the skies. Stay near and give her
back up if she needs it. Keep us informed. Barton, go high and stay there. Pick 'em off. Call out
patterns and take down strays. And Loki..." Another pause passed, but Loki's eyes were leveled
on him with calm expectation. "...Can you get us a distraction?"

"My dear Captain Rogers... " A terrible, sly grin slid across the God's face, "...If there is anything
I am capable of, it is that."

Loki disappeared then, off to do as he pleased. Tony muted the suit's speakers to privately instruct
JARVIS to keep the Mark VI on the sorcerer's trail.

Steve turned back to the others and pulled on his hood. "I'll stay on the ground with the Hulk.
SHIELD should be here soon to help with evac of the civilians... Stay in contact, everyone. Let's
show 'em what we're made of."

He nodded one last time and everyone returned the gesture. 

"Let's go."

They broke. Tony grabbed both the assassins by the scruff as Steve ran off to get in the fight,
rocketing up to drop Clint off on a nearby roof. He could hear the Hulk smashing away nearby,
but he just pulled Natasha up into an Iron Man embrace to secure her for their little flight.

"Tell me what you need."

The battle went on. As Tony and Natasha approached the mothership, Captain America wove
through the streets of his old city to clear out civilians and take down the bad guys. The Hulk left a
trail of smashed buildings and asphalt in his wake while Clint played Robin Hood from the
rooftops. Loki, who had taken his assignment to heart, had managed to orchestrate the most
conspicuous distraction of all time: commanding a Leviathan. Tony caught a glimpse of the
sorcerer on his new scepter-influenced steed, which he rode through the skies to strategically
topple buildings on top of enemy forces. The Chitauri who had been attached to the beast were
also caught up in Loki's spell; they fought their comrades on the ground, purple blood spilling all
around. It was the most destructive distraction Tony had ever had the privilege of seeing.

Tony watched until the sight disappeared. Then he came up alongside the mothership and
chucked Natasha through one of its window at her command, which began their infiltration in a
less than quiet manner. He followed in and stuck a beautiful, trademarked, Iron Man three-point
landing right on top of a surprised soldier while Natasha gunned down the rest of the ambushed
forces in the small storage room they had broken into.

"Where are you?" Loki's voice echoed over the radio waves.

"Armory." Natasha reported, glancing out the window. "The Empire State Building is on our
three o'clock. I need intel."

"It's the really tall building, sometimes climbed by King Kong, other times by Thor and his-"

"Thank you, Stark." Loki cut him off, not in the least bit grateful. "The main control center is at
the heart of the ship. Find it." A pause, a screech and an explosion, and then a sigh. "Barton, you
did that on purpose."

"I would never, Sir."

Tony was impressed. Clint had just one-upped JARVIS on how much sass could be contained in
the word 'sir.'

Natasha went to the door, leaning out into the hallway to scout the path ahead. "Stark, get their
attention. Draw them out." She scavenged a gun from an alien's corpse and another from the wall,
securing them at her waist. "I'll let you know when I've reached the target."

Tony nodded, flying back out the window without another question. Loki might be good at
distractions, but so was he. Explosions and theatricality were practically the lifeblood of the Stark
family. It was a publicly known fact.

"All right, J." He directed his attention to the city around him. "Time to turn on the fireworks."

"With pleasure."

Tony took to the fighting, staying near the mothership and mowing down the hordes as well as he
could. The suit just kept getting more powerful by the minute, as if invigorated by each kill. He
felt more alive than ever. Not even twenty minutes after Natasha had started her mission, the
repulsors had gotten so overcharged that they ate straight through the metal plating that armored
the Leviathans. When Loki had finished with his stunt, his brainwashed Chitauri forces spent, Iron
Man had sped by to lend a helping hand. The beast went down hard on Madison Avenue, falling
from the skies like a brick dropped off the edge of the Empire State building.

"Good shot." JARVIS congratulated.

It took a turn for the worst when that second wave came. More Leviathans and more Chitauri
descended from the heavens, wreaking havoc far outside the perimeter that the Avengers had been
holding. It forced them to spread out and try and contain the mess, which pulled Iron Man farther
and farther away from Natasha. It was then that Loki's attentions took a drastic shift; he was suddenly in the battle instead of playing games on the sidelines. Tony finally understood why Thor had always been so concerned that they not underestimate his little brother.

Iron Man went to the extended perimeter to try and force the fighting back to the center of the chaos, working off Steve's orders. He was easily picking off strays and flying in to get rid of the big guns, and out here he could keep tabs on everyone. It went well for a while. Hulk smashed. Captain America kicked ass. Clint blew things out of the sky. Loki quenched his bloodthirst.

But peculiar things began to happen an hour in, when everyone finally started to tire.

For one, there seemed to be a sniper following Captain America around, picking off anyone who got too close to Steve's back when his attention was diverted. Neither Tony nor JARVIS could pinpoint who was doing it or where, but it was undeniable that the good Captain had a ghost sticking to his back. Tony didn't have time to decide what that meant and declined to mention it.

Loki also gained a ghost of his own, but there was far less mystery attached to that. Clint had hijacked a sky chariot and was shooting people down like an evil archer-elf from hell. He covered Loki's ass and Loki would blow people out of the sky for him from time to time. They worked disturbingly well together, even though Clint kept making enemies blow up when Loki was in the splash zone.

SHIELD showed their faces eventually, helping evacuate civilians and lending firepower from their pretty new helicarriers ("Those were my upgrades, thank you!" Tony had screamed in their general direction). But the enemy just kept coming, and coming.

Eventually, Natasha's voice came back on the comms.

"Loki, I need intel. Stark, I need back-up."

Tony came to a metaphorical screeching halt in the sky, quickly diverting his flight plan back to the mothership.

"Coming, dear!" He imagined Natasha was rolling her eyes. "JARVIS, have the six on Clint's two o'clock and have the seven clear a path for me."

At his command, the Mark VII's red and gold form appeared a few hundred feet in front of him, clearing away the enemies that tried to protect their hive queen. He could hear Loki feeding Natasha instructions as he approached, but he was more focused on the window he was about to bust through to get to her. He could see her crouched behind an overturned table in the control booth, outnumbered ten-to-one and probably low on ammo. The enemy was getting closer to her, too close-

"Incoming!"

He sent a greeting in the form of an abnormally large repulsor blast, destroying a window and blowing half of the enemy away in a single sweep. There were screeches and screams from the remaining five and Tony came to a stop in their midst, hovering in the high ceilings of their headquarters.

"You got time to run." he offered.

They either didn't understand him or didn't care, because they started shooting. One blast hit him in the shoulder, moving him only fractionally back in the air.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."
A burst of bright light and an explosion followed, leaving a pile of bodies behind. If Tony never had to see the color purple again, he would be a happy man.

"How's my favorite itsy bitsy spider?" When he touched down next to her, the suit’s faceplate snapped up. She stood and brushed off her clothes.

"Cute..." She caught sight of his Tesseract-blue eyes, making her own narrow. "Stark, are you-?"

"Agent?" Loki was calling over comms.

She put a hand to her ear. "I'm here." Abandoning whatever question she was about to ask, she turned to go to the main controls, jumping over the railing to bypass the stairs. Tony followed. "Tell me you have good intel."

"I always have good intel, Agent Romanoff. Is Stark with you?"

"I missed you, too." Tony shared, leaning over the foreign controls. He couldn't make sense of any of the writing.

"Good."

Then there was radio silence for a long, long time.

"Loki?" Natasha tried.

No answer. And then-

"-erfucker!" Clint's voice over the sound of crunching bones, screaming, and wind. "Loki just went AWOL. I lost eyes on him."

Natasha was cursing beautifully in Russian, but Tony wasn't fazed. Instead, he had JARVIS use the other suits to try and get a location on their missing God of Mischief. It took a moment, but through the eyes of the Mark VII Tony spotted familiar golden horns; Loki was at the ship's helm, standing off with Amora. Green eyes made direct contact with the suit, but then a rogue Chitauri launched itself from a chariot and attacked, managing to tear off an arm and the helmet before the connection died. Tony cringed for the sake of his fallen brain-child.

"The Mark VII is offline." JARVIS reported. "Enemy forces are approaching your location. Estimated time of arrival is forty-five seconds. I believe our axe-wielding friend has made a come back as well."

Of course.

They were running out of time. Tony turned back to the controls, wanting to know what to do. He could do Earth tech, any of it; Russian, Chinese, Korean. A computer was a computer, no matter what language it operated in. But Chitauri was a little bit out of his range.

He decided he would get a little more rudimentary with trying to crack these codes. Rather, if the codes didn't exist, he wouldn't have to crack them. They would just stop working all on their own.

"Power up the uni-beam, JARVIS." He snapped his face plate back down.

"Sir, I would not recommend-"

"JARVIS."
"Must I point out that the ship may not remain airborne?"

"JARVIS!"

"Uni-beam at seventy-three percent power." the A.I. resigned. "Would you like white lillies at your funeral?"

"We've been over this, JARVIS. I want fireworks and booze."

The progress bar displayed on the HUD hit full power and he registered the red dots of enemies right outside the door. Oncoming Chitauri let out their battle cry and Natasha moved for cover.

"Hit it!"

A column of energy exploded from the arc reactor, piercing through the controls and straight through the metal of the ship. It ate away at foreign tech and Natasha yelled at him as the ship swayed, its flight systems suddenly faltering with the damage. Lights flickered and computers sparked around them, but when the uni-beam powered down, they were still airborne. Enemies stumbled through the door, screaming as they fired off plasma blasts. Tony returned fire, but quickly found himself distracted.

"-nothing, Amora. Your Leviathans fall from the sky. How much longer until your ground forces f- and- the scepter will not- Thor-"

Loki's voice came over the intercom through a sea of static, informing them all that Tony's stunt had worked. The Leviathans were down. Of course, they had everything else to deal with, but that was still something.

"What's going on up there?" Steve's voice. "Whatever you're doing, it's working."

"Anyone want sushi?" Clint laughed.

Tony didn't have time to answer, because then Skurge was barreling through the line of gunmen at the door, axe held high.

"Clench up!"

Tony grabbed Natasha by the forearm and then they were airborne, escaping through the broken window and flying straight up, heading for the helm of the crippled ship.

"Loki's engaged Amora." He told the team, feeling Natasha grip onto him for dear life. "And I've got a flying spider. Hawk?"

"On your six. Hold position."

In a few seconds the archer came up beside them in his stolen chariot, perched on the back of the creature that acted as the pilot. He had two arrows in its shoulder blades as a makeshift steering wheel, which was so many shades of fucked up. Tony moved so Natasha could touch down on the carriage behind.

"What the fuck happened in there?" Clint demanded.

"Recklessness." Natasha said, wiping blood from her lip. "Lack of forethought. An idiot with a weapon-

"Hey, I think I did pretty good." The line didn't hit. Natasha was giving him the same look as
Pepper had after the Ivan Vanko debacle at the Stark Expo. "Whatever. It worked, didn't it? They're down."

"Yeah, all over the Museum of Modern Art." Clint grunted. Above them an explosion and a display of green and blue light lit up the night. The fight had started. "What about those two?"

"I'll take care of it." Tony said. "But there should be an axe happy viking running around up here soon if you want to take a crack at that."

Clint shrugged. "Why the hell not? Just don't get your metal ass killed."

Tony smiled at him. "What do we say to the God of Death, Barton?"

Before Clint could match the reference with a response, Tony was a shooting star across the sky. Arching high over the mothership, he caught sight of Loki's jacket whipping around him as he struck at Amora with the scepter, but she dodged with the grace of a ballerina. With a snarl, she hit him with a blast of green heat to the chest. He hissed and drew a dagger, moving too quickly for Tony to see. It must have hit, because Amora grabbed for her side and Loki smiled, wrist twisting. She cried out, wrenching away from him.

Skurge made his way onto the scene then, battle cry and all.

"Barton!"

"I see him."

"I see him."

The arrow pierced the viking's arm, but he continued to sprint forward at an impressive pace, not letting the wound sway his focus. Natasha was next, jumping down from the chariot when Clint veered close enough, rolling into position next to the enemy. He moved to swing his blade at her, but she rolled again and dodged, attaching small tasers to his legs as she did so. When they activated, he seized; Natasha took the opportunity to try and disarm him, but then his hand was around her arm and the electricity arced between them.

In response, Tony disarmed Skurge. Literally.

The limb separated at the elbow joint, leaving behind a bloody mess of bone and flesh as Natasha fell with his disembodied hand still firmly grasped around her. She was still convulsing and Clint jumped in to save the day, hooking an arm around her waist and pulling her out of the way when Skurge moved to smash his good fist down on her head, screaming bloody murder.

"JARVIS, get 'em outta here."

The Mark VI appeared at that command, battered and dented, but functioning. One hand grabbing each assassin, the trio was soon speeding out of danger. It left Tony and Loki alone with a one-armed viking and an Enchantress.

Tony touched down inches away from his partner.

"Well." Tony readied himself, watching Skurge grope for his fallen axe. "You ready for this, Loki?"

There was a deep chuckle from beside him.

"I only hope that you are."
Tony tucked, ducked, rolled, and fell off the edge of the mothership. A brief moment of panic gripped his heart before the thrusters engaged and he was flying back towards the battle, the repulsors whining as they powered up. When Skurge came into view, Tony let off a series of focused blasts, putting the viking off balance as he twisted mid-swing to avoid injury. Loki used that precious second to maneuver out of the way of the ill-aimed blade, skating forward and around Amora’s bodyguard to get closer to her. She was fighting back like an animal cornered, on the defense with teeth bared in vicious bloodlust. She suffered through a variety of wounds, from the incisions of daggers to the burns of magic. Sweat beaded on her brow as Loki wore her down, and Skurge was beginning to stumble in his charges every time he went to protect his Queen. They were tired.

But Loki and Tony were no better off for their efforts. Tony’s suit was badly damaged and holding together by nothing short of a miracle. JARVIS’ warning messages about failing joints and hydraulics were endless. In theory, the Tesseract could power the suit for years on end, but it couldn’t stave off the damage that had been done. The camera lenses that fed him images of the battle were broken, putting literal cracks in his vision. The thrusters and the repulsors were worn down, putting hiccups in all his flights and forcing him to work with longer power-up times. The 3D rendering of the suit was a red beacon in his sensors. The left gauntlet still wasn’t registering and everything else was at fifty percent functionality - or less.

In turn, Loki had lost most of his grace. Still covered in purple blood from his battles on the streets, he blinked in and out of battle as strategy dictated, but he was worse for the wear. The sheen of perspiration on his brow reflected light just as intensely as his helm did, while sweat-damp tendrils of hair clung to his skin. A wound beneath his hair offered a steady stream of blood down his right temple. Daggers glinted between his fingers before they were sent to meet their mark, blood trails often following in their wake. One of his vambraces had been broken off and Amora had turned a knife against him, carving her mark in him from palm to elbow. It wept red, but he paid it no mind. When Tony had wondered aloud if blood magic was a thing, Loki had just offered him a wicked grin. Amora had looked a little paler after that.

Tony barrelled through the skies to tackle Skurge, making a point to collide on the viking’s bad side. As the beast of a man went tumbling, Tony landed on his feet and started and firing off concentrated bursts of energy from his repulsors, switching off between them to compensate for the suit’s damage. The left glove seemed to pack more of a punch than its brother, but the suit was so beat up that Tony could do little but roll with it.

He heard the deafening screech of metal being torn from itself behind him and then Loki’s back was rammed against his, the suit creaking under the force of contact. He buckled down to support the weight and looked over his shoulder to see the two sorcerers locked in a standoff. Amora was trying with all her might to heave an impressive, jagged chunk of the ship at Loki, but a beam of his own magic prevented it; the disembodied piece of the mothership remained suspended in midair, wrapped in a cradle of emerald and green. The gaping hole left behind on the playing field presented a problem: Chitauri were beginning to claw their way up and out to join the fight. Tony let loose a small projectile explosive - “Fire in the hole!” - to keep the threat at bay. Judging from the screams and small explosions, the tactic worked. But the suit was running low on ammo and he had no doubt that more would come.

“So, Loki...” Tony tried for nonchalant, returning his attention to Skurge. The repulsor blasts were keeping him down for seconds at a time, but that axe he swung was still sharp and he wasn’t dead yet. “About what happened in Malibu...”

“You wish to speak on this now, Stark?!”

Good. He hadn’t needed to explain himself. He and Loki were on the same page.
“Well…” He tried to shoot Skurge in the face, but the bastard dodged and then Tony thanked him with a shot to the Achilles’ heel. The viking went down on a knee and blood spurted from his ankle. “I’ve always been told I have an impeccable sense of timing.”

He didn’t need to see the eye roll to know that it had happened. It was followed by a grunt as Loki’s magic overwhelmed Amora’s and the not-so-circular death star of metal went rocketing her way. She must have dodged, because the sorcerer behind him cursed and Clint’s complaint came over the comms.

“I swear to God…”

“Yes?”

“Can it, Horns. Stop dropping shit from the sky.”

Tony just laughed. He thought he heard Loki chuckle as well, but then Skurge had dodged another attack.

“You are missing, Half. A. Limb.” With every precise, punctuated word, Skurge only got closer. “Just go down, you stubborn shit!”

But Skurge kept coming, axe held aloft in one hand. Finally accepting the inevitable, Tony gave in, bit the bullet, and issued an order:

“JARVIS, direct all power to the repulsors and uni-beam.”

Tony waited. He waited until Skurge was too close, until the axe was coming down and Loki was yelling a warning at him. Then-

“Hit it!”

The repulsors sang and the arc reactor vibrated in his chest as the suit turned into three blinding points of energy and light. Skurge was too close to evade; it hit him square in the chest, sending him and his axe flying away like a bottle rocket. Tony was propelled in the opposite direction per Newton’s third law, but Loki’s back was like a brick wall; the God had dug in his heels, returning the favor, and they didn’t move an inch.

Ultimately, Skurge was blown right off the side of the mothership with a gaping hole where his vital organs should have been. The axe clattered on the ground before it slipped off the edge to follow its master.

Power to the unibeam and repulsors were cut, followed by a fatal popping noise from the left gauntlet. Tony watched the repulsor within flicker and spark before it finally died.

“Oh.” He shrugged and turned to face his true target, standing in line with Loki. “Sorry about your boyfriend, Amora.”

She was a wreck. Her golden hair was a fly-away mess around her blood-spattered face and grief raged in her eyes. Emerald magic swirled around her clawed hands, which she raised up as if to strike. Tony quickly returned the favor by raising the last functioning repulsor he had. Loki, amused, only chuckled.

“You are outmatched, Enchantress.” He stepped forward, spinning the scepter in his hand. “You stand against us, defenseless and weak. The Executioner is dead. Shall you surrender, or do you pray for Hela’s sweet embrace?”
“Midgard burns.” she hissed. “I am backed by the force of a hundred thousand soldiers.”

“Yes, I see that…” He glanced to the fighting in the skies around them, which were only bursts of light and gunfire against the black night. “But they fall, just as you will. There is no escape.”

Her lips curled into a snarl. “There is only my victory.”

“For you, Amora, there is only death.”

She struck then, casting blasts of emerald magic both to Iron Man and Loki. Tony dodged and Loki deflected, but then she was upon her kinsman like a harpy. Tony was apparently forgotten; the two sorcerers were caught in close combat, moving about each other with inhuman speed. They were too close for Tony to offer any help, but he found a distraction quickly enough - Chitauri soldiers had started climbing out of the hole in the ship again. Out of any incendiary grenades, Tony was forced to take them on hand-to-hand, repulsor-to-face.

There was a moment in this second wave of their battle that Loki was bested by a particularly nasty splash of green magic, which sent him skidding and forced the scepter from his hand. The weapon let out a distinct crack and Tony thought he heard the shattering of glass. He turned to see the Mind Stone dislodged from the staff instead, rolling to a stop a few feet away from the scepter. Only a split second passed before Loki was back in action and sliding on his knees to take the scepter in his hands, expertly twisting himself to bury a foot in Amora’s abdomen as she lunged for the stone. He had it back in his grip before she attacked again, which Tony stopped short with a pointed blast to her chest, sending her magic awry and away from his partner.

She fell to her side and writhed in a moment of pain as Loki forced himself to his feet, pressing the blue stone back into its place between the blades.

“You never answered me.” Tony said, watching as Loki spun on a heel and sent the last Chitauri soldiers plummeting off the edge of the ship.

“What would you have me say, Stark?” Loki straightened up, wiping blood from his lip. “Do you fear I bedded you with an ulterior motive? Or do you believe it to be some premeditated act of manipulation?”

“I was kind of under the impression lying was your thing.”

“Your faith in me is astounding. I’m flattered, truly.” He turned back around to face Amora, who had risen to her hands and knees. A green aura was vibrating above her skin and glowing something fierce. “Would you even believe me if I told you what you long to hear?”

“What do you think I want to hear?” He watched Amora get to her feet, still glowing, and readied himself.

“Perhaps…” Then there were hands on his shoulders and Tony looked to Loki, his confusion hidden by the mask of his suit. “That I have told no lie this night.”

He might have processed that better if he hadn’t been immediately wrenched around and off his feet, Loki’s hands like vices around his arms as he was anchored into the ground. Before he realized what was happening, Amora had sent a barrage of magical projectiles their way like a gatling gun from hell, each of them denting and ricocheting off the back of the suit. Loki was using him as a goddamn human shield.

“You son of a bitch!”

Loki simply laughed in his face before he spun him around to face their opponent, one hand at the
suit’s waist and another wrapped around the forearm of the functional gauntlet, raising it high in the air. The scepter was forgotten and a bolt of electricity shot up Tony’s arm, seizing his muscles and making the tips of his fingers tingle like static.

“There was no lie.” Loki whispered in his ear.

Loki willed the suit to fire and it obeyed his call, a beam of blue and green energy piercing through the air. The sensors began to show nothing but garbled information and JARVIS was a choppy voice of static in Tony’s ear as the suit moaned and groaned with overwhelmed machinery. The attack was short, as if Loki anticipated he might damage the suit beyond repair, and soon the sorcerer parted from the mechanic.

Amora had evaded the worst of it, but the duo had left their mark. Her right arm was nothing but black skin and bone, which oozed black from the residue of magic. Tony swallowed hard to keep down any leftovers from dinner.

"Where is my brother, Amora?" Loki demanded, striding forward. "Speak if you value your continued existence."

"You want Thor?" Her voice was broken, but she still raged with all her fury. "You can't have him."

Loki snarled and she lunged at him, but the attack was feigned. At the last second, she threw herself at the ground and escaped him, coming to a skidding halt at her true target. The scepter, which Loki had dropped to power Iron Man.

For half a moment, it appeared as if she had gotten the victory she had wanted. Tony tried to blast her, but she rolled away with a smile, forcing herself to her feet. She was laughing in her own disbelief. Could she have truly won when the battle had turned so foul?

"It never fails.” Loki had the gall to sound bored, folding his arms behind his back. "You all fall for my simplest trick."

The illusion Loki had cast on the weapon faded. Amora’s eyes widened in abject horror as the light in the blue stone died, the illusion fading away to reveal a broken, cracked surface. The gem was hollow. Gone, Tony thought, before he saw it for what it was: a containment chamber. The gem had never been a gem; the power had been hidden inside.

"If you wish for the stones, I suggest focusing on your former victim." With a flourish of his hand, Loki gestured to Tony.

He blinked, not immediately understanding the implication. JARVIS, bless his wired heart, was one step ahead.

"Sir, the left gauntlet."

The face plate snapped up and Tony raised his hand for inspection. JARVIS had been right all along: there was a piece of his suit missing. Another of Loki's illusions washed away to reveal some gaudy, gold Asgardian gauntlet instead of the suit glove. Two glittering gems, blue and gold, were embedded in two of the knuckles.

“The Infinity Gauntlet.” Loki introduced, and Amora was as pale as death itself. “Do you still believe in your victory now, Enchantress?”

She floundered for words, red lips moving in silence.
"I give you one last opportunity." His hand slipped inside his duster, groping for something within its pockets, "I propose a bargain. My brother for a guarantee of your safe passage to another realm. Of your choosing, of course. Thanos will come for you, but perhaps you will have a fighting chance at life."

It was then that Loki withdrew a rectangular stone, which he held before him. A red vein ran through its center and pulsed with ruby power. Amora's mouth parted in disbelief.

"If you refuse, I will unleash the fury of a thousand worlds upon you."

It wouldn't work, Tony thought. She was too deep in her own shit to abandon it now.

"You would see the universe fall all for him?!" She demanded. "For someone you claim to hate?"

Loki took the stone in both hands, twisting it to crack open whatever seal held it. Red liquid spilled from its container and came to swirl around him, seeping into every pore and running thick beneath his skin.

Tony watched in awe and horror and Loki's eyes turned black. A red mist of power now swirled about him.

"I would see the universe fall for my own amusement."

When she tried to run, a tell tale vortex of green teleportation magic swirling around her, Tony didn't hesitate to shoot. A powerful orb of blue energy rocketed forth from his palm, hitting her square in the chest and forcing her to fold in on herself. She screamed as light radiated from the impact and the Tesseract's energy overpowered her spell, expanding her magic to a breaking point.

A portal opened and swallowed her whole. Her teleportation spell had gone awry, leaving a gaping hole of her magic to allow anyone to follow her to her intended escape.

“Come.” Loki moved to the portal, a terrifying visage against the night. The pathway was already shrinking. “Let us find my wayward brother.”

He stepped into the darkness, not waiting for Tony to follow. If there had been time to reflect on the last few minutes of his life, Tony would have, but the door was closing fast. He wasn’t left with much of a choice, and like hell he was going to stop when he’d come this far.

Memories of a portal and a nuke crossed through his mind as he launched himself into the dimensional tear. Darkness swallowed him as Steve demanded an explanation for the what they’d just ripped open over Manhattan, but the connection died with a pop of static before he could answer.

The portal closed just after his toes passed through it.

Tony Stark had officially left the building.

Chapter End Notes

(I hope you all like action sequences, because that was the longest one I've ever written in my life. The next chapter isn't going to be so extremely battle-based, I promise.)
Thor Odinson sat alone underneath the expanse of a midnight sky, where the stars and planets were painted in vibrant colors on the ink-black canvas of space. There was no sun to rise or fall in this stretch of the universe, leaving this island of barren rocks alone in the darkness and cold. Up the stairs behind him was an empty throne, its court of jagged rocks and dirt spread out before him. His breath fogged the air as he leaned back on the stone staircase, green eyes raised to observe the galaxies around him.

He was reminded of Asgard. T’was not as bright as the golden city, nay, but these stars echoed the ones that kept silent vigil over the rainbow bridge. He longed for that comforting light of home, but knew he was banished. He closed his eyes and resigned himself to its memory instead.

When he had first awoken here, it had been to the taste of a bittersweet apple on his tongue. He had seen the golden fruit in the Enchantress’ hand and her other had been on his brow. His body had ached and his skin had been like fire, all while his mind had struggled to pull itself to consciousness.

The first memory to return had been of the Destroyer. Asgard’s guardian had been before him and a Midgardian street had been terrorized. Sif and the Warriors Three stood behind him, worn from battle, with Jane, Darcy, and Erik in their numbers. His friends had come seeking to bring him home. The wrath of Asgard’s King had followed them.

Loki.

“These people are innocent. Taking their lives will gain you nothing. So take mine and end this."

The Destroyer had brushed him aside as if he were not worth the time. Jane’s hands had found his face as he lay in rubble, offering comfort in his final moments. Her touch washed away the pain of his shattered ribs and broken skull. The growing pressure of blood pooling in his brain had been ignored.

“It’s over.” He had tried to say. “It’s over.”

Darkness had swallowed him.

Then there had been pain. Welcome pain, sweet pain; lightning surged in his heart and electricity arced through his body. Godhood was returned by Idunn’s grace and the lands of Midgard were far from him.

During his recovery Amora had relayed to him the bleak state of Asgard. The Odinsleep still reigned and Loki had maintained the throne. The mortals had lashed out in response to the Destroyer’s actions, frightened by the activity of an unknown force. When they had refused to submit to his rule, Loki’s wrath was unleashed and the flames of war had burned the realm.

Some of Asgard had abandoned their new King, Amora claimed. They, like she, fought for Midgard’s sake. To this end she had aligned herself with those that would lend her an army, which she now commanded. Whatever price she had paid was not spoken of.

“I will look for your Jane Foster.” Amora had promised, “But hope not, dear Thor. Midgard’s future is bleak, its forces spent. This borrowed army is their last chance, but we stand against
Asgard’s might. If we are destined to fail, we cannot linger.” She had taken his hands, speaking with a sincerity that had warmed a fire within his heart. “There will be nothing left for you or for humankind. Promise me that you will stay by my side. If I am to escape with my life, I cannot face the expanse of the unknown alone.”

If Jane was truly lost to him, if Midgard was nothing more than ruins and blood, Thor had promised to grant her request. He would stay with her. After all, Asgard’s doors had long since shut to him. There would be nothing left for a disowned Odinson anywhere in the Nine.

The light of a falling star streaked through the blackness above and Thor thought of Mjolnir, still lost to him.

He had offered up his very life to save others, but that had not made him worthy. What could, if not that? Was he truly such a shame upon his Father’s name?

It all felt strange. Wrong. Perhaps that was to be expected, but he felt as if he was being led astray. There were times when he felt as if there were no truths to which he could follow, and a weight would sink deep in his chest.

“The best lies are the ones with truths, brother.” Loki had told him once, and these words were often echoing in his mind. “Watch for them, lest you fall victim.”

He felt himself in the balance between unknown forces, left with nothing to hold onto if he were to fall. His discomfort felt as if it originated in his very soul.

Thor shook his head and tried to clear his mind. Were he to give it time, it would surely pass.

Needing to move, he stood. He collected his blade - Mjolnir’s replacement, Janbjorn, was an axe from his youth - and secured it at his side while thoughts of green and gold continued to flicker through his mind.

Loki had attempted to kill him. He had lied to him, betrayed him. Though the whispers of Loki’s past advice were constant echoes in his mind, he thought better than to give them more weight than need be. There was more than simple bad blood between them now. The Loki Thor had loved was likely no more.

Magic pulled him from his thoughts when a wave of power rocked the foundations on which he stood. By the time his hand found Jarnbjorn, a mouth of green and blue fire was opening at the opposite end of the empty court. The star-painted heavens were interrupted by a void of Midgard’s blue sky, which was darkened by columns of rising smoke. Thor saw hints of red and green beyond as a form stumbled through the passageway.

Amora appeared, disheveled from her time in battle. Her pale hand clung to an arm of blackened, charred flesh and her green crown was tilted askew in her golden locks. Her emerald eyes met his and she gave him a single, precise order:

“Out of sight, Thor.”

When he moved to comply, drawn to do so without thought, she spun on heel to face the portal that had borne her. The Other blinked into reality behind her, unnoticed, and Thor’s mouth twisted in displeasure. The men that Amora had aligned herself with were strange creatures, but this one Thor liked least. He was nothing more than cruel words and blackened teeth, with purple robes that clothed blue-grey skin. The very sight of him was like to make any warrior’s skin crawl, and Thor found himself reminded of metallic blood and flames in his presence.

Just as he had concealed himself behind a large boulder, another wave of magic came. Someone
else was passing through the portal, and Thor pressed himself flat against the wall of rock as he peered around its edge to see the oncoming threat.

“How prosaic.” Loki stepped into their world with a wry smile twisting his lips. “You run into the arms of your keepers when threatened. I expected more of you, Enchantress.”

Thor turned sharply away to obscure himself once again, heart pounding in his ears. Just strides away from him his green-cloaked brother stood, his eyes as black as tar. Loki was surrounded by the blood-red force of the Aether, an ancient, devastating power.

Knuckles whitening again around Jarnbjorn’s handle, it took all his might for Thor to remain where he stood. Had the crown brought madness upon his brother? Was the burden of the throne too great? Where was Gungnir, and where were Huginn and Muninn? Of these three things a King of Asgard would never be without, no matter the opinions of his people or darkness of his reign.

“The stones come.” Amora was saying, clearly shaken. “You’ve your prize.”

Loki chuckled. The Other gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“She has succeeded where you failed.” Feet scraped across the ground, signaling the creature’s movement towards Loki. “A promise was made last we met.”

“Ah, yes. No barren moon on which I might hide…?” Loki recalled, and Thor knew he was smiling. The Other would be wise to run. “I came here prepared for more formidable foes. ‘Tis a pity I am met by only the likes of vermin.”

The Other gave a laugh that made the hairs on the back of Thor’s neck stand on end.

“Monster, you say?” Never had he heard Loki allow himself to sound so offended. “Allow me to enlighten you to true monstrosities, then.”

Before anyone could meet their untimely end, the portal gave way to one last pulse of power. The noise of flight mechanics broke through and the magic faded, signaling its end. This interruption was as unexpected as it was unwelcome; Thor peered around the rock’s edge again to know its purpose.

A man encased in a metal suit hovered a few lengths above the ground. Neither on Asgard nor on any other realm had he seen such a suit of armor, and it drew his brows together in curiosity.

Given a few seconds, the warrior touched to the ground and revealed himself: a mortal man of brown hair and unnaturally blue eyes, with a face drawn by trials of war.

“Looks like we’re not in Kansas anymore, JARVIS.” The man gave a dry half-smile, his eyes darting from Loki to Amora. “Thank god for elevated oxygen levels, though. I feel like a million bucks.”

Thor recoiled as if he might have been struck, synapses abruptly firing off in his mind. He smelled sweat and oil while the bite of whiskey burned his throat. He heard snippets of voices, fractured conversations: You’ve got a mean swing, Point Break-I mean, I’ve got a thing for blondes, but I have a feeling you might roll over and smother me in your sleep-Why didn’t I get invited to the party?-don’t touch my stuff. Lighting flashed in his mind’s eye and he knew the smell of pine; Loki sat upon a mountain, smirking; a blue-clad warrior with a shield put a halt to the tides of
battle and gave him a headache.

Thor blinked twice and then shut his eyes tight, shaking his head. A new headache bloomed. Everything began to feel like a dream. Somewhere deep in his mind, faceless men and women were shifting behind the protection of a veil. The metal man was the only one among them who had a face. It flickered through emotions, laughing, smirking, and frowning without cause.

For a moment, the world around him was lost. Emerald swam in his vision as a forgotten part of himself tried to reach out, trying to push through the mist-

“Thor.”

He snapped back into reality to see black eyes drilling directly into his own. The mist and the veil were lost, all the unknown images fading as quickly as they had come.

“Well.” Loki stood with the Other’s head in his hand, looking wildly unimpressed. During Thor’s distraction the two had clashed, resulting in a battle wherein the creature had been reduced to a paste-like mess of blood and shattered bones. Its head tumbled into those remains as Loki let it roll from his fingers. “I’ve always said that green does not suit you.”

Thor squared his shoulders and emerged from his hiding spot, grip tight on Jarnbjorn. He watched as Loki gave it a lazy glance before he gazed up and down to assess the threat Thor posed. He was deciding what he would do to the man he had thought he had killed, no doubt, and perhaps wondered how he had been restored to godhood.

“I loathe to say that it’s good to see you.”

Thor’s jaw went slack in honest surprise. Loki gave him a sly grin in response.

“Not what you expected to hear, brother mine?”

Black faded from his eyes and green returned, the Aether’s power now kept at bay. He took careful steps towards his brother as Thor finally took notice that Amora had been backed into a corner by the man of metal.

“Pay them no mind. Stark prefers justice with less blood than I.”

The man, Stark, hefted Amora up to her feet by her arm. She clawed at his wrist as he held the other hand up to threaten her, blue light bleeding from his palm.

“You’ll have him unhand her if you care for his life.”

Loki folded his hands behind his back, hardly concerned about the axe Thor was raising.

“What threat are you like this? Without your precious hammer, you lack your power.”

Thor grit his teeth. “I can still best you.”

“Unlikely.” The Aether grew denser. Were it sentient, it would be mocking him. “Be that as it may, I’ve yet to provoke you.”

“Provoke me?!” Thor’s fuse met its end at the sheer audacity of it all. “For all you have done, for all that has been said, you think that your crime would not lead me to battle?”

Loki had the gall to look bored. He extended a hand, gesturing with a dagger for Thor to continue. “Do be more specific. They say I’ve committed many crimes.”
That was the button waiting to be pressed; Thor moved forward with a sound of frustrated rage, swinging Jarnbjorn high and then low. It was met blade-to-blades with Loki’s daggers, one in each hand to stop the axe in place over his head. That did nothing to tame Thor’s anger.

“What had I done?” He demanded, pulling the axe back and swinging again. Loki danced out of his way. “How had I wronged you, brother?!”

“As I said: specifics.” Loki pulled to one side at the last moment of a swing, which buried the axe in the ground and brought Thor into a low, vulnerable pose. He pulled quickly from it, but was left shaken by the fact Loki had not taken advantage of it.

“The Destroyer?!” He swung the axe falsely in one direction, moving it another way with a twist of his wrist; Loki was not quick enough to correct, and was rewarded with a blade deep in his waist. He twisted in pain as Thor held it there, though whether his stillness was for shock or cruelty he did not know. “My death?!”

A flash of confusion passed through the Trickster’s eyes, which soon morphed into realization. In turn, that moved into dry amusement, and he breathed a quiet chuckle as one hand gripped the blunt end of the axe.

“I see.” He pulled the blade free before he doubled over, grasping at the wound. “How… droll.”

Thor stepped back, feeling somehow fragmented. Everything was wrong again. Aye, brother and brother now fought, wounding one another. That would always be foul. But it was more than that; more than blood on a blade and painful pasts. Something was inherently wrong.

Loki’s eyes bled back to black again and Thor knew he had to move. Amora needed him, not Loki; this was his chance. He raised his axe to see Stark hauling her up by the neck and his pace doubled to clear the distance between them. She fought back and her head was pressed back into the rock, hit once against its surface when she lashed out again—

“If I am King, why do I not look it?” Loki called out. The metal man turned to watch them both, leaving Amora pinned, and Thor found his footsteps slowing. “Come now, Thor, think. I have no ravens, no spear. Only magic.”

In that moment of pause, Loki had taken the opportunity to transport himself back between the warrior and the Enchantress. Unnatural, jagged lines of ruby had hardened his wound. The Aether had not healed him, but it acted as a cork in a bottle’s mouth, preventing further blood loss.

“Had I the Bifrost, what need would I have to come here to kill you? I could rip the world asunder from afar, as I did with Jotunheim.”

Thor’s grip tightened on Jarnbjorn. This piece of information distracted him marvelously, and his eyes widened fractionally in horror.

“What has befallen Jotunheim?” He had no love for Frost Giants, but he now knew his wrongs against them. “Loki, what have you done?”

“I attempted to burn the heart out of their realm.” There was no amusement in his bitter smile. “Don’t you remember, Thor? The Bifrost, the broken bridge? You were quite intent on sacrificing the one you loved for the betterment of the Nine.”

Amora made a noise, but Stark tightened his grip around her throat. Thor tensed at the shoulders, but couldn’t raise his weapon.

“We fought.” Loki was saying, stepping forward one slow pace at a time. “We fell, you and I, and
hung from the edge of the bridge with Gungnir betwixt us…”

Again, unbidden images came: Asgard’s night skies, a black hole tearing apart the universe, and falling shards of the rainbow bridge glimmering among the stars. His brother had been below him, dangling; the Bifrost’s power threatened to swallow him whole if either grip faltered on the spear. His father’s hand had been on his ankle. They were a chain of three. One link threatened to break.

The mist returned. Untold tragedy shifted behind its veil as this glimpse of memory threatened to return in full. Loki was closer now and Thor’s headache was pounding, drowning out everything else. Jarnbjorn clattered to the ground at his side, forgotten, and he fell to his knee. Loki fell with him, pale hands clamping around his armored forearms.

“If I am King, why do you wear my emblem upon your vambraces? Why do you mourn me when you know I live?”

Thor looked down, as if fate bade him to see the truth of it.

Loki told no lie.

Upon the metal of his armour was carved the likeness of Loki’s helm, its arched horns stirring memories from deep within. He felt the heat of a smith’s fire, the echo of grief in his heart calling back to when he had commissioned these vambraces. The mist in his mind thinned and he felt Loki’s hand upon his neck, long fingers touching his nape in a familiar display between them. The younger brother began to see blue break through the webs of emerald magic in the Thunderer’s eyes.

“Thor.”

The reality Thor knew almost shattered. He could feel himself on the brink. There was a taste of apple upon his tongue and his mind felt like it was aflame. Some thing was breaking, and he thought it might be his own sanity. Yet, somehow, that was welcome.

Magic broke the silence, splintering the moment. Together the brothers turned their heads to see Amora writhing under her captor’s hold, her fingers encased in emerald magic as they dented and broke through the metal gauntlet that held her. Stark was barking out obscenities, trying futilely to maintain control.

“He killed her!” When his grip finally faltered, she fell on weak legs, catching Thor’s gaze with her own. ”Jane Foster is dead!”

Thor felt himself falling, but it was different now. All his doubts and false memories escaped him while her eyes drew him in, telling him his world was right. The trance Loki had lured him in with was broken by another and Thor’s heart felt as heavy as his axe when he raised it once more.

Loki blinked once before resignation came over his features, mild annoyance flashing through his eyes. It could not be said that Thor was completely beyond reason, but there was always a point that could be reached where words held no more merit. Be it by insult or provocation, Thor’s hot blood could get the best of him. There was only one thing Loki could think to say in face of this realization.

“Damn.”

Then he drew his blade, quite ready to strike that thick skull until it cracked and gave way to common sense.
Tony let off round after round of the last of the suit’s projectiles at Amora, cursing her with each miniature explosion and whirring bullet. She still had enough fight in her to protect herself with a thin shield of magic, but it wouldn’t last long. Tony was intent on breaking it. If he had his way, and he always had his way, he would tear this bitch apart limb from limb.

Who the hell was she to screw up their lives like this?

He blasted her with a pulse of the Tesseract’s power, which left her shield to be eaten away by blue flames.

“You think—” Another shot to her bad arm, which sent her to her knees. “—that you can come into my house—” She flung a spear of green magic at him, which knocked the left gauntlet straight off his arm. He decided to pick it up off the ground and throw it at her. “—and dick around with my life?!” She shielded herself with her forearm. The broken metal bounced to the ground. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Stark!”

Tony turned in time to see Loki side-stepping away from Thor in the same way a matador avoided a bull. The Thunder God charged at him and he barely had enough time to launch himself up off the ground, but thank all the crazy-ass Gods that the thrusters were still functional.

“How badly do you wish to be reunited with your mortal thrall, Thor?” Loki goaded, wiping blood from his chin. A cut was sliced cleanly down his cheek. “I can oblige you.”

A green portal opened behind the Trickster, ringed with the red of his new powers. He just smiled as he stepped back into its embrace, his eyes briefly meeting with Tony as he did so. Follow me, they said.

Though he felt as if he’d had more than enough experience with magical pathways for a lifetime, Tony knew he didn’t have much of a choice. He flew towards the ominous void, but not before hitting Thor in the forehead with a harmless blast of energy.

“C’mon, Hammerhead.” he goaded. “Give it your best shot.”

As he felt himself pass into the portal, he glimpsed Amora trying to hold Thor back. The God pulled from her touch with determination, and Tony couldn’t help but smile in realization as the black swallowed him whole.

That was the answer, wasn’t it? The hammer. Get Thor back with his best inanimate friend and maybe the universe would get its shit together.

When the portal spit him out, he found himself on his back on the concrete, skidding to a stop next to a great, big, green foot.

“Welcome back, Sir.” JARVIS greeted as the Hulk looked down at him and his scary-adorable, stupid face broke out with a grin.

“’Sup, buddy?” Tony smiled back as a huge hand grabbed him by the shoulder and heaved him up to his feet, putting finger-shaped dents in the metal plating.

Steve called for him over his restored comms as the suit gave a final, fatal creak. Piece by piece, the metal armor began to dismantle and fall to the ground. Some of the pieces sang as they hit the asphalt, while others just gave dull, resounding thuds.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Tony sighed, taking off his helmet. He dropped that among the other pieces.
“Back in black.”

“You’re not kidding.” Barton said, presumably in eye-shot, “That suit’s toast.”

“You look like shit.” Iron Patriot - no, War Machine dropped down next to him, and Rhodey’s smiling face was revealed when the face plate retracted.

“You’re late to the party, Rhodes.”

“Me? I’m not the one who went MIA for six hours.”

“Where’s Loki?” Romanoff wanted to know. She sounded tired.

“Don’t know. Scary red magic, portals and shit - I can’t keep track.” The sun was up. It suddenly occurred to Tony that it had been night when he’d flown through the first wormhole. “Wait, six hours? What’d I miss?”

“The Air Force stepping in on our game.” Nick Fury’s voice came through the Avenger’s private link, but Tony couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised. “Nice to see you back, Stark.”

“Nice to see my helicarriers being put to good use. Did you notice I put all the controls on the right? Thought it might be less exhausting.”

“Funny.”

“No, funny is throwing me in the Hulk Tank. Right?”

“Save it.” Rogers snapped.

“What, the war still on?” Tony asked, “Did you guys break for dinner, or something?”

“Sounds like Stark needs to be put down for a nap.”

“Buy me dinner first, Natalie.”

Hawkeye snorted. “You couldn’t handle her. Trust m-”

“Cool it.”

Captain America didn’t get the chance to bark out any more orders, though, because some ragged looking Chitauri were climbing out of a manhole a few feet away. War Machine’s weapons sprung out at the shoulders, but he didn’t get the chance to fire anything off before Hawkeye interrupted.

“What the hell is that?”

The ground shifted in what felt like an earthquake, and then the Chitauri started to scream. It wasn’t the usual prepare-for-death battle cry - no, they were screaming in pain. Tony watched a wave of ruby magic seep up around them before it took a solid, dark form and broke into tendrils. Each slithering vine wrapped around their necks and dragged them back down into the sewers of the city.

“That, Barton, is power.” Loki informed. The sound of Clint’s surprised curse indicated that the God of Mischief was probably standing right behind him. “Captain Rogers, your city’s internal infestation has been eradicated.”

There was radio silence from Steve for a moment, before he managed to come back online.
“...Thank you, Loki.”

Tony decided that Captain America sounding disturbed wasn’t one of his favorite things. It almost bothered him as much as Pepper’s I’m-disappointed-in-you face, but he would deny that until he was six feet under.

“Let’s focus.” Tony decided, clapping his hands together. “We’re going have one angry Goldilocks showing up any second now.”

“Goldilocks?”

“Yeah. Big blond guy, red cape-”

“Thor?” Fury demanded.

“That guy you said I killed. Ring a bell?”

Who was bitter? Tony Stark surely wasn’t bitter.

“Stark-”

“Where?” Rogers interrupted.

“I don’t-”

“Loki’s got ‘im.” Barton supplied. “They’re on fifth, near the park. Since when does he do axes?”

“We’ve got eyes on them from Helicarrier One.”

Tony couldn’t help himself. “Don’t you mean an eye?”

The Chitauri mothership was still hovering in the sky and bleeding out forces, but she was flanked all around by three helicarriers. US Airforce jets were flying in formation around the city, on the offense. It looked like Earth had the upper hand.

“If he’s hostile, we should let Loki handle it.” Romanoff suggested.

“And who’s to say that crazy motherfucker won’t ki-”

Because today was the day of interruptions, Fury’s response was cut off by a pillar of white light from the heavens. It struck the heart of Central Park and was enough to make anyone an upstanding, god-fearing citizen, and that promptly sent Tony’s mind racing. Any and all Bifrost activity meant that he was going to have some angry warriors coming his way, Thor or not, so he tipped an invisible hat to his friends.

“Have fun with that.”

It was time to get to Loki and fix this mess, or wind up in another prison cell.

Ignoring Rhodey’s calls for him to come back, Tony sprinted down the street. Yeah, he didn’t have a suit. He was vulnerable, he was being reckless - it was nothing that he hadn’t heard before. On a normal day, he might have even turned his ass around and gone back to the safety of his friends.

Normal days were over, though. With two shiny gems embedded in his fancy new Infinity Gauntlet, a whole new world had opened up.
Who need friends when he had magic?

Magic quickly proved to be fucking badass.

“...magic is a 'force.'” Loki had told him once. “A force that turns will into reality.”

He had the Gauntlet and the stones. He had the will.

Blasting his way past a demolished Starbucks and skidding around a street corner, Tony found himself more caught up in his own fascination than he should be. Enemy forces were trying to shoot him down, but he didn’t give them a second thought as he ran from one piece of cover to the next.

The Tesseract began to show him things he had never thought to see. He was ten steps ahead of every single thought that flicked by, and they came in hundreds by the second. The Mind Stone was intertwining with every neuron he had, opening doors and making new ones as it went. Everything became impulse under the influence of unfamiliar power, and Tony didn’t have time to make much sense of any of it.

Still, if there was a will, there was a way.

He wanted to get to Mjolnir, so a portal manifested. Sure, it helped him bypass six blocks of traveling - kickass! - but that didn’t stop there from being a less than pleasant scene on the other side of the passageway.

It was Amora. Surprise, surprise.

Between them lay a mini-van sized crater of asphalt. Obviously unable to lift the hammer herself, she had decided to take a more destructive route: tearing the asphalt straight up and out, Mjolnir and all. It hovered about a foot in the air within an orb of emerald magic, while the remains of Thor’s memorial littered the street around them.

When she saw him, her resolve hardened.

“I have sacrificed too much!” She screamed at him, swaying dangerously as she increased the last of her magic two-fold. “This blasted hammer and your wretched Avengers will not best me.”

Tony heard Thor thundering somewhere behind him. Loki’s laugh followed, but the sound was dry. He could hear the bricks tumblings and the groan of a metal. A building was sacrificed, spilling dust and debris on the street behind him. Collateral damage was the name of the game when two Asgardians fought it out.

Tony raised the Infinity Gauntlet.

“Put. it. down.”

Amora snarled.

Mjolnir and its asphalt throne fell to the ground with a resounding crack, fragments of the street shooting out like shrapnel. He made the mistake of lifting his arm to protect his face, and Amora seized the opportunity to strike. Wrenching away from her first attempt to pin him, he stumbled back towards Thor’s broken memorial, but she felled him with a second lunge. The sound of his skull cracking against the asphalt rang loud in his ears as she straddled him, pressing him down and into the ground with a single hand to his chest. Bones snapped beneath her strength and Tony saw white.
“I did you a mercy, leaving you to Odin’s wrath.” Her nails tore through his under armour and he felt her hands on the arc reactor. His breath hitched and pain shot up his side. “But now you welcome mine.”

The click of the arc reactor leaving his chest was deafening. Her smile was wretched as his mind ran fifty-million miles a minute. Curiosity glimmered in her gaze as her fingers traced the ridges of his metal heart. Its life-sustaining wires were pulled taut.

“Your life force.” She was gloating, like a B-rated villain from a shitty action movie. “And a fatal flaw. How the mighty fall.”

Taking advantage of her moment of self-indulgence, his hand groped for anything around him. A rock, a pole, a sharp piece of metal - something to knock her flat out and keep the arc reactor attached and undamaged.

She squeezed. The reactor whirred in displeasure beneath the stress, its delicate intricacies creaking. Somewhere behind him, a woman was calling Thor’s name. He couldn’t feel his fingers.

“Goodbye, Stark.”

Finally, his hand found purchase. Whatever he had grabbed, it felt as hard as steel, and that was all he needed. Tony Stark swung with all his might.

The sound of Amora’s skull cracking beneath Mjolnir would be etched into the insides of his skull for eternity.

“NO!”

Tony barely heard Thor’s cry. Mjolnir hit the ground with a metallic ring and he felt it anchor itself into the ground, unmoveable once more. His heart pounded in his ears like a death knell. His internal countdown was dropping fast.

Amora slumped forward in dead weight and Tony managed to pry the arc reactor out from between them. With some difficulty he managed to slide it back into place; relief came like a crashing wave. Only then did he shove Amora off and sit up, which was followed by the sound of Loki’s bitter laugh.

“Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy-”

Loki, helmet missing and pinned to the ground by the Warriors Three, was silenced as Sif’s spear pierced through his shoulder. He looked a little singed around the edges, like he might have taken one too many thunderbolts. Thor obscured him from Tony’s line of sight, striding forward with purpose, axe ready at his side. Amora twitched and hitched in a broken breath.

Tony desperately tugged at Mjolnir to save himself from an angry God.

It didn’t budge.

Not worthy, he thought. Never had been, never would be; the realization was a pit in the bottom of his stomach. It wouldn’t move for his sake. It didn’t give for anyone but Thor.

A disk of red-white-and-blue hit said Asgardian in the back of the head, distracting him for a precious second. Steve Rogers, good ol’ Captain America, was running full sprint towards them. How the big blond bastard managed to single-handedly catch a boomeranging shield while sprinting sixty miles an hour was beyond Tony, but he did know that the knucklehead made a damn good white knight.
“Get down, Stark.”

Thor raised his axe, meaning to swing for Rogers.

Tony decided he would swing for Thor instead.

Mjolnir was a lot lighter than expected, and it flew a lot faster than physics should allow. It hit Thor in the chest with a crack as loud as thunder, sending him tumbling into the side of a building. Brick and concrete gave beneath the force, sending up a plume of dust and debris.

Captain America stood in shock, his eyes as wide as Sif’s.

Thunder boomed and storm clouds obscured the morning sun. Lightning flashed in the hearts of the rolling clouds.

The world felt still as Tony waited.

Thor Odinson rose from the rubble a few moments later, hammer in hand. The green was gone from his gaze, freeing the blue that now darted to and from each person before him. He was confused, but confusion was a lot better than bloodthirsty.

“Welcome back, you ludicrous oaf.”

Loki’s words garnered Thor’s attention, which drew the Thunderer’s face in grim lines. As he strode forward he gave a wave of his hand and the three warriors of Asgard separated themselves from Loki. But Sif remained, hand tight on her spear.

Steve went to stand next to Tony, thinking this all might go south very quickly.

“He is a fugitive of the throne—” Sif started, showing no signs of relenting her weapon.

“Lady Sif.” Thor’s voice was heavy, tired with emotion.

“-harboring stolen power, forbidden -”

“Lady Sif, you know not-”

“-This cannot be excused for blood’s sake, Thor.”

Thor placed his hand on the shaft of her spear, forcibly wrenching out from his brother’s shoulder. Sif was not strong enough to prevent it, but she had damn well tried.

“It shan’t.”

Tony thought that sounded like a promise.

Thor grasped his brother by the arm and hauled him up to his feet, but he didn’t release him once he gained his footing. While warships fought and fire burst in the skies above them, the brothers shared a quiet look. In this, they knew the other’s intentions. Thor’s unrelenting hold said that despite his good deeds, Loki would not escape punishment for releasing the Aether. The black that seeped into Loki’s eyes and the red mist that bled from beneath his nails suggested otherwise.

However, despite any forthcoming battles, they both knew they were glad to see the other in health. They were free, living, and standing on the same side again for a single moment. Perhaps they would do so again in the future.
Loki tilted his head to the skies, ending the silence.

“Well?”

Thor gazed heavenward and Mjolnir was hefted high. A bolt of electricity was drawn to the hammer like it was a lightning rod, allowing thousands upon thousands of volts to shoot down from the storm. More joined the first and Thor became nothing more than a white silhouette in a blinding display of power. One by one, each witness was forced to shield their eyes.

All but Loki, who stood only with a wry smile.

“Incoming.” Steve said. That was all the warning that anyone got.

The intertwined bolts of electricity struck the heart of the Chitauri mothership as Thor let loose a battle cry that rivaled his own thunder. White hot lightning arced and burned its core until its armies fell silent.

Natasha cursed in beautiful Russian. Rhodey’s and Clint’s reactions were far more crude, but no less inspired. Steve and Fury just watched in awe.

When the ship finally began to fall, engulfed in flames while it cracked at its seams, Thor called for the gatekeeper of Asgard. The beam of the Bifrost pierced through the heavens once again and encased the wreckage. Thor’s lightning flickered out. The Mothership’s remains burned at Asgard’s touch until it was nothing more than red embers and fire.

Mjolnir dropped to the ground.

Rain and ash fell together from the sky.

No one spoke. No one moved. The city was alive with sound around them, but there was a bubble here that no one threatened to burst.

It was over. It was finally over.

As it was, it seemed fitting that Loki saw fit to disturb this quiet moment of peace.

“Very well then.” He wrenched himself from Thor’s loosened hold, holding his hands up in surrender when he moved to grab him again. “Peace, brother.”

Thor didn’t make another move to take him back into custody. As Loki strode forward, all the warriors of Asgard had eyes on him, but the Asian one Tony didn’t know and Volstagg had busied themselves with making sure Thor didn’t fall over. He had started to sway dangerously.

“It is good to see you.”

“Aye, Volstagg.” Thor smiled as his friend clapped him on the shoulder, even though he was tired. Slowly, he took Mjolnir back up. “Are you well, Hogun?”

Sif bent to pick her spear back up. Fandral moved to stand at her side, muttering something into her ear. Her expression twisted.

Tony was distracted from all this when Loki stopped short in front of him, offering a hand out in assistance. With his borrowed power misted about him and hints of ruby-encrusted wounds peeking out from behind the tatters of torn fabric, he was quite the sight to behold. But beneath that layer, in the blackness of Loki’s eyes, Tony saw the hints of something less awe inspiring. Where he expected power and victory in his partner’s gaze, there was nothing. Loki was hollow.
within, a raw nerve beneath a crafted image, the Aether’s darkness having burned him through.

Tony managed half a smile and took his hand, deflecting his anxiety with a prepared line.

“You look like shit, babe.”

The blackness faded to give way to green, closing the open windows to Loki’s soul. An inquisitive glance followed in response to the sweet-name, but Loki didn’t address it directly.

“So says the man with a broken rib cage and a fractured skull.” Loki pulled him to his feet so fast all said injuries made themselves known. White flashed again and the world tilted - no, he tilted, but Loki’s had a hand on his shoulder to steady him. “If anyone looks like death, Stark, it is you.”

“You know how to make a man swoon.”

All he got in response to that was a quiet hum. He was left to stand on his own when they were both sure he wouldn’t fall over, and then Loki brushed by him without another word. His attention had been drawn elsewhere.

“Brother.” Thor’s tone was in warning.

Loki bent at the waist and picked Amora up, draping her across his arms with little care.

“Let me guess.” Loki looked over his shoulder to Thor. “You would give her to Asgard.”

Thor untangled himself from his friends, taking a mindful step that put him between Sif and Loki. For whose sake that was, Tony wasn’t sure.

“Loki-”

“You would do a favor to a woman who sought to enslave you?” Amora’s eyes fluttered open, but they closed just as quickly. “Who killed your Lady Jane?”

Thor’s grasp around Mjolnir tightened. He seemed set in his resolve, despite the hatred he harbored for the Enchantress. When it came to sticking to their guns, Thor could put Steve to shame.

“She will be held accountable.”

“The price for a hundred mortal lives in Odin’s hall is an eternity of imprisonment. What shall it be for one?”

“You were spared the block for the sake of your blood.” Sif interjected.

“Blood had little to do with it, I assure you. I am no son of Odin.” His expression darkened as he grew tired of this game. “As she is no daughter. She will be gifted the same punishment as I, and so she will escape it.”

“Were that true, I would return her to Odin’s justice.” Thor insisted.

“I intend to see she meets true justice.”

When Loki paced away from them, Sif and Fandral moved to intervene. But Thor was upon his brother before they had a chance to step in, the tatters of his red cape heavy behind him.

“And who were her crimes upon, Loki?!” The Thunderer demanded, anger getting the best of him. This was met without any hesitation from the accused; Loki never faltered when standing
toe-to-toe with Thor. “T’was my mind she warped, t’was Jane she felled.” His voice weakened, but his resolve did not. “What right have you to swing the axe?”

The rain poured harder, soaking through cloth and bone alike. But the brothers stood through the storm as if it did not affect them, oblivious to clinging strands of hair and damp armor.

“I’ve every right.”

Without warning, green fire sprang to life about Loki’s feet. The Aether surged forward and Thor stepped back, unburnt, forced to watch as his brother made his escape.

“Loki, no!”

It was Tony who spoke. For all that people said about him, for having been called the Merchant of Death, and for being a world renowned fuck-up, Tony Stark still had a conscience. For better or for worse, it often got the best of him.

Maybe it was surprise alone that halted Loki mid-spell. Curiosity was what moved him to meet Tony’s gaze, but his expression was otherwise unreadable. His form was shifting behind the curtain of heatwaves and magic, his and his victim’s form half-gone. However, for a brief moment, Tony thought his word might have been enough. Loki’s form had become a shade more solid.

“It’s not right.” He tried.

Loki blinked once, twice, and then his mouth pulled into the faintest smile. There was something almost sentimental laced in his expression, but that disappeared when his lips twisted into a final smirk.

“Until next we meet, Stark.”

The flames jumped high and Mjolnir was thrown.

Loki and Amora were gone before the hammer could find them.

Tony Stark did not faint. Fainting was for pussies.

No, Tony Stark walked his MENSA-certified ass straight into the hospital like he owned the damn place and told the nurse to give him the presidential suite. Then he passed out like a proper super-hero.

Chapter End Notes

/dead
Pepper Potts stood in the hospital lobby, waiting.

Tony didn’t see her standing at the reception desk. He was distracted by his nurse - or, rather, his entourage of nurses. It apparently took three young women to get one man in a wheelchair and down from his hospital room, but Tony wasn’t complaining. Positive attention was a nice change from what he’d been receiving lately, and the medication definitely made him more pleasant to be around.

His entire body buzzed with painkillers. Sang with it, really - the last time he remembered being this high was at a party in MIT, thanks to a friendly bunch of hippies. He didn’t know why they had taken pity on him, but he had sure been grateful for it at the time. It had spurred him to finish coding DUM-E and maybe that explained a lot about his favorite old robot.

Shifting the black duffel bag in his lap, he moved to adjust the strap of his sling. He was definitely worse for the wear. His left arm was strung up, his wrist was braced, bruises tracked down one side of his neck, his head pounded with a healing fracture, and all his old injuries were crying with the aches of his body. Definitely too old for this shit, he thought. Definitely too old.

Still, he knew he was lucky to be able to walk away from this battle.

As his nurses wheeled him up to the reception desk, he wondered when his luck would run out.

He was abruptly shaken from his thoughts when a woman shoved a clipboard underneath his nose. He blinked at it.

“Thank you-” Pepper glanced down at the receptionist’s name tag as she plucked the clipboard out of his line of vision, not missing a beat. “-Bethany.”

When she traded the clipboard to Tony for his duffel bag - because he didn’t like being handed things - a smile broke out on his face.

“Well. Look who it is. How long have you been standing there?” He tried to stand up, but an attentive nurse forced him back down with a hand to his shoulder. With the way his world spun, that was probably for the best. “Where were you when I-- oh, yeah, Greece? How was that? I was just saving the world while you were working on that tan -- nice tan, by the way. Crisp. Gold. You’ll get all the chicks. Hey, wanna be the first to sign my cast?”

“That’s a brace, Mr. Stark, not a cast. Autograph, please.” She was being formal, but she was smiling, and that was all that mattered.

“Anything for you.” He winked as he signed the paperwork, then tossed the clipboard onto the counter. “Thought I was going to have to face Cap’ high, y’know. Imagine that.”

She hummed and waved his nurses away, ignoring the disapproving muttering that followed. Tony winked at the lot of them as Pepper took the handles of his wheelchair. He craned his neck back to look her as she dropped a bag of medication in his lap.

“I have a fractured skull, three broken ribs, a sprained wrist, and a shattered funny bone, if you were curious.” he offered. “I shattered my funny bone, Pepper. Is that normal? What am I going to
do if I can’t make jokes anymore?”

“I’m going to blame that one on the medication.” she said kindly, pushing him towards the door. “Greece was very nice, thank you.”

He smiled, watching her face.

“Red eyes again. Crying for your boss?”

A smile tugged at her lips, even though she refused to look at him.

“Hush, you. I can still call Captain Rogers.”

That shut him up fast. He looked forward to give her some space, but his head leaned back against her hand.

A group of reporters were waiting for them outside, circling like vultures around a carcass. The first candid shot of Iron Man gone-bad-gone-good was likely to bring in a nice little paycheck for some lucky idiot, Tony realized. It was almost like the good ol’ days, when the paparazzi followed him around waiting for the next scandal, hoping to get it on camera. The days before Iron Man, when things had been simpler.

He scratched at his unkempt beard, trying to think forward instead of back. Neither was preferable, he realized; looking back reminded him of old hurt, and looking forward gave him nothing but dread.

“Where are we going, Pep’?”

“To the tower.” She was apologetic, sensing his apprehension. “But I thought we might stop for cheeseburgers, first.”

He laughed even though it made his ribs ache.

When Tony arrived in his penthouse, he said hello to JARVIS and immediately initiated a lockdown on his floor.

It took five hours for Natasha to break in.

“You're getting rusty.” Tony announced, looking up from his tablet to watch her saunter into his room and brush off her sweats. Her grappling gear hung off the balcony railing and a nasty-looking device clung to the glass doors. “What is that thing? I want one.”

“Hiding from something?” She deflected.

He leaned back in bed and popped another pill, discarding his tablet.

“That’s what fugitives do, don’t they? Hide? Let me guess - Fury has questions.”

“Would you believe me if I said I’m just here to make sure you’re not dead?” She tossed him a flask as she crossed the room, which he managed to catch.

“Well, look at me. Alive and kicking. Mostly. I figured it was time for a little r-and-r, some peace and quiet, you know- Holy hell, what is this? Rubbing alcohol?”
She shrugged, leaning over to rifle through his mini-fridge.

“Borrowed it from Steve. Hungry?”

"Sure."

She acquired some prepared meals and settled into bed next to him, leaning against the headboard on the unoccupied side of the mattress. They ate cold pasta directly out of the tupperware, but they had enough dignity not to share the same fork. Not that either of them would care.

“Rh’dey?” Tony had directed the conversation to asking after everyone. He might as well take advantage of her visit.

“Close your mouth when you chew. He checked in with Air Force medical and went for a debriefing in the capitol. His suit needs repairs.”

“Barton?”

“Broken finger, sprained wrist. He’s been grounded until further notice.” She wiped sauce from the corner of her mouth with her thumb.

“Bruce?”

“Keeping to himself."  
Tony sighed. “And how’s your fearless leader?”

“Steve's on media, doing rounds in the city. Avoiding Director Fury.”

“What’s Fury’s deal?”

“Thor.”

Tony frowned. Natasha shook her head, crossing her legs beneath her.

"He's hasn't been... cooperating." She decided. "Not the way Fury wants."

"Thor, being stubborn? Shocker."  
She rolled her eyes.

"Fury's been trying to get at you since the Chitauri fell. Thor took it upon himself to threaten war if anyone so much as breathed in your direction."

Tony laughed shortly, surprised. "What?"

"You're our only link to Loki and Amora." She pointed out. "You have information."

"Oh." He swallowed. “And?”

“And Steve's backing Thor.”

Tony chewed on that information for a moment, sighing. He rubbed at the arc reactor.

“What about you?”

“Fury sent me.” she confirmed. "But Pepper bribed me.”
He laughed, setting the food in her lap.

"What'd she give you?"

"An IOU."

"That's... valuable." Tony was surprised. Pepper was scary when she wanted to be, and now she had the full backing of the company.

"I know." She placed the tupperware in the hollow of her legs, leaning back against the headboard. "So what should I tell him?"

“That I’m enjoying my painkillers.”

He winked when she rolled her eyes at him. She shifted in her seat and he caught a glimpse of an ankle brace as her sweats rolled up.

“Did you scale a building with a sprained ankle?” It wasn’t entirely out of the question.

She ignored him. “Next.”

"Remind me not to piss you off, again." He muttered. He thought over the people he had asked after, then tried for nonchalant with the last name on his list. “Loki?”

Natasha nodded as if she had been waiting for that question all along.

“In the wind.”

What else had he expected? He was probably galaxies away with Amora, doing some unspeakable cruelty. Avoiding everyone and everything associated with Asgard in the process.

“Yeah, sure…” He rest back in his defeat, absently holding his bandaged ribs. He thought about the blacks of Loki’s eyes until Natasha decided the silence had lasted too long.

“Fury wanted intel on your new tech.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“The glove.” In one graceful movement, she pulled the black duffel bag from the floor onto the bed, unzipping it without hesitation. Deaf to Tony’s immediate protest, she withdrew the golden gauntlet from within. “If you could even call this tech.”

With his head spinning from the medication and his sides aching, Tony knew better than to reach out and try and take it from her. She would be too fast for him, anyway. Resistance was futile.

“I don’t think that’s yours.”

When he met her gaze, her expression was unreadable.

“We found the broken staff.” She explained, turning the gauntlet over in her hands. “The cube is missing.”

She knew, he realized, or she at least thought she knew.

“Steve wants a meeting when Thor gets back from Asgard.” She warned. “The weapons, what happened on the other side of the portal, your relationship with Loki - there will be questions.”
His laugh was dry. Relationship - what a word.

They didn’t even know the half of it.

“Then I better think up some damn answers.”

On his third day home, Tony finally rejoined the land of the living.

The tower was quiet. Steve spent his days in the city doing press events and helping rebuild. Natasha had been called into SHIELD to help with collecting alien tech from the rubble. Bruce had removed himself from a stressful environment and had taken a few days to go see Betty Ross. Thor was gone. Pepper was on press duty.

Thankfully, Clint decided it was best to give Tony a wide berth.

Tony tinkered in the workshop, rebuilding his broken suit. Improving it, too. Distracting himself from the fact that their official team meeting was tomorrow and that no one had heard a peep from either Thor or Loki.

Jane Foster’s funeral was the day after, JARVIS politely reminded.

He was weighing the pros and cons of attempting a Captain America style deep freeze when there was a knock at the workshop door.

“I’m not doing any interviews, Pepper.”

The door hissed as it unlocked, quietly swinging open.

“I would ask you to do no such thing.” Thor said.

Tony’s heart jumped into his throat.

The silence was deafening.

“...If you would have me come back at a more opportune time, I would-”

“No.” Tony responded too quickly, putting down his soldering iron. DUM-E whirred and pulled away. “No, I- It’s good to see you again, big guy. Come in.”

Thor’s footsteps echoed out behind him, and Tony was quite sure he heard the sound of beer bottles clinking against one another. Mjolnir rang as it was set it down on the table. There was a crack and a hiss that confirmed Tony’s beverage suspicions, and he gathered up a fake smile before he swiveled around in his chair.

He expected to see full Asgardian armor, but instead was accosted with the odd sight of Thor in normal clothes. Cheap jeans, a navy shirt, and a tan jacket replaced the usual armor and red cape. What with the beers in his hand his his hair loose, he looked downright… Midwestern.

“How do you fare?” Thor offered him a drink, something like hope in his eyes. After only a beat of hesitation, Tony took the peace offering presented to him, quick to drink.

“How do you fare?” Thor offered him a drink, something like hope in his eyes. After only a beat of hesitation, Tony took the peace offering presented to him, quick to drink.

“Can’t say I’ve been worse.” He gestured to his sling with the bottle. DUM-E rolled up to Thor’s side and craned his camera this way and that, chirping in welcome. “You?”

“I am… well.” He pat DUM-E on the claw, but sounded as if he were convincing himself of that instead of Tony. “Well enough. We have much to speak about, Man of Iron.”
Tony steeled himself, glancing to the suits behind him. “If you want to go a few rounds, just-”

“Peace.” He shook his head, half of a sad smile pulling at his lips. “Peace, friend. I only wish to speak.”

“Sorry.” Tony muttered, though he wasn’t sure why. “I... A lot happened.”

“Aye.” He leaned against the workshop table, and Tony thought about the day they’d hauled Thor’s corpse-- Jane’s corpse onto it. “I’ve heard tale of your… misadventures. But I would like to hear it from you.”

Tony’s brow furrowed in a flash of surprise. “They didn’t tell you everything?”

“Bias skews their account. There is much they don't know first hand.”

“Tell me about it.” He snorted, shooing DUM-E away. The robot hummed and whirred, bending its arm in disappointment as it retreated.

“I would know about my brother, as well.”

Tony lifted his head, curious.

“Suppose he’s still gone, then?”

Thor sighed, as if the question were a weight on his shoulders. “Aye.”

“Well...” Tony shrugged off his hesitation and clapped Thor on the back, moving to the nearby couches. “Then you’re right. We do have a lot to talk about.”

It went well. Better than expected, really. Even when the story got rough and a bit unbelievable, Thor listened. His expression shifted only a handful of times; surprise when Tony recounted Frigga’s involvement in their escape, interest in Loki’s enthusiastic involvement, and intrigue when Tony talked about seeing Jane in a dream.

“You had a vision.”

Tony gave him a skeptical look behind his tumbler. They had moved onto harder liquors after the beer had run its course.

“Dream, more like.”

Thor didn’t seem convinced.

“Dreams are simple, never so complex. Magic, or if Jane were trying...” His brow furrowed, and Tony was a little glad he didn’t finish that sentence. He was content to let Thor stew in the supernatural, but he didn't subscribe to that. “What did she say to you?”

Details. Unpleasant details.

“We talked about what happened.” Tony shifted in discomfort, remembering the cold that had spread through his bones that night. “About you.”

*If you asked Thor, he would tell you that dreams mean more than we think they do.*

Thor nodded, looking at his folded hands. Whatever was on his mind was beyond Tony, but it had his forehead drawn in deep thought.
“Thank you for humoring me.” He nodded, and Tony suddenly got the feeling he was the one being humored. “What happened after that?”

“Not much.” Sex with Loki, but that didn’t need to be mentioned. “Amora blew a hole in my mansion. The fighting started. And then you.” He gestured to him, and Thor gave a weary smile in response.

“Surely this tale will find its way into the songs of your people. Perhaps at my expense.” It felt like a little bit of a joke, so Tony gave a little laugh. Thor smiled for it. “Thank you for taking the time to tell it.”

Tony sighed into his glass before taking a drink. “What about you?”

Thor shifted, resting back and lifting Mjolnir. He rolled its handle between his palms.

“I was enchanted with a spell that altered my memory.” He remembered, mindlessly watching the designs engraved on his weapon spin this way and that. “I believed myself to have woken after the Destroyer attacked me, at Loki’s order. He was my enemy and my heart was raw for his betrayal. In that, you were unknown to me. Our friends...” Mjolnir stilled. “My ignorance led me to attack.”

Tony shrugged, leaning back.

“Wouldn’t be the first time we fought.”

“I swore to never raise my hammer against comrades, once.”

“You didn’t.” He tilted his bottle to him. “It was an axe.”

Thor snorted, shaking his head. His little smile was enough, though, and he set Mjolnir back down on the coffee table. A peaceful quiet stretched between them, in which Tony was content to finish his drink.

“...I do not blame you for what transpired.” Thor admitted sincerely, breaking their silence. “I wish for you to know that.”

“You should. Blame me.” Tony said, blunt. He was not beyond blaming himself.

“You were enchanted the same as I. Were I to hold you accountable for what Amora bid you to do, I must hold myself accountable for the same.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t kill anyone.”

“Because you intervened.” He gestured to Mjolnir. “For that, I'm grateful. I never thought I would live to see the day when someone else lifted her.”

Tony gave it an uneasy glance and then promptly filled his empty glass.

“It was a fluke.” He grunted. “Tried three times. Managed twice.”

Thor nodded, eyes on his hammer as if it held the secrets of the world.

“Then your intentions were worthy.” He decided, looking up. “Mjolnir deemed your worth by your moments, not your life.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Go easy on the fortunes, big guy.”
“What were they?” Thor disregarded his skepticism. “Your intentions?”

Absently, he examined the amber liquid inside his glass. It wasn’t hard to remember those last moments of the battle.

“To get you back.”

The night before the funeral, the Avengers gathered for a team meeting.

Much could be said for it. It was mostly Steve and Fury’s game, complete with plenty of talking, plenty of pissing contests, and plenty of arguments. Tony should talk about his magic gauntlet, Tony should hand it over to SHIELD, Tony should give it back to Asgard; Tony this, Tony that. Tony, Tony, Tony, and Tony didn’t even bother to protest. He just let them talk about him like he wasn’t even there, mildly amused and mostly tired.

“If Mr. Stark intends to be an active, participating member of this team…” Director Fury was saying, “…Then he damn well better stop playing hard to get.”

“Wait.” Tony spun in his chair a little bit, twirling a pen between his fingers. All eyes went to him. “Am I part of the team now?”

If Fury could kill a man with just his stare, Tony was pretty sure it would have happened right then.

“You were pardoned. You got an official apology. What do you want me to do? Wipe your ass and dry your tears?”

Tony straightened up, leaning forward on the table.

“What I want is for someone to ask me if I even want to be on the team anymore.”

Thor’s attention turned to him from the back of the room, where he stood with his arms crossed. Natasha’s eyes flicked to him and one of Clint’s eyebrows shot up. Bruce cleaned his glasses. Fury shook his head and sighed, opening his mouth to retort, but Steve spoke up before anyone else tried.

“Tony, do you want to be on this team?”

And now with the question asked, Tony lost a little bit of his gusto. He’d played this scenario a million times over in his head, imagined all their reactions, and even planned an escape route in case everything went to shit. It wouldn’t, he knew, but he had a hard time trusting anyone now.

He squared his shoulders and faked a signature Tony Stark smile, but he knew his teammates saw right through it.

“No.”

And that was that.

Jane Foster’s funeral took place in Willowdale, Virginia. A small gathering of people attended - old friends, SHIELD operatives, Darcy, Erik, and the intern’s intern named Ian. And while the Avengers usually stood out the most in a crowd, what with skin tight catsuits and red-white-and-blue spandex, another party stood out more starkly against the sea of black.
The Asgardians.

Tony was sitting on someone’s headstone up the hill, with a statue of death mounted on the stone just behind him. Gold glinted up from the Asgardian party of eight, the lot of them dressed in full formal regalia. Thor’s red mantle waved slightly in the breeze and his four warrior friends stood around him, but what caught Tony’s attention more was the unexpected guest, flanked by golden two guards.

Frigga, Queen of Asgard.

At least Odin hadn’t come, he thought. What a scene that would have been.

Loosening his tie around his neck, he saw Pepper appear in his peripherals. She stood in silence for a time, watching the service with him. That didn’t last long; when she finally got a good look at him, he heard the huff and sigh he was expecting. Yes, he looked like shit. Surprise, surprise.

When her hands slide through his hair to fix it, he couldn’t help but shake his head and chuckle. “Helmet hair.” She accused.

“Suit’ll do that to you.”

He let her fuss and tidy him in peace, not having the heart to say anything else.

“Where would you be without me, Mr. Stark?” She said when she finished, stepping back to admire her work. “We should go down, now. It’s time to pay our respects.”

He glanced to the scene and sure enough, the drone of the priest had stopped and the eulogies were over. People were walking by the casket, paying their respects.

“I’ll be down in a minute.” he promised. “Just… let ‘em thin out.”

She nodded, understanding, and left him alone in his silence.

Alone, his anxiety festered in the pit of his stomach. Funerals weren’t new to him. At seventeen, he’d been staring down at the casket of his parents. Howard’s had been closed - the body was too marred for viewing, someone told him - and Maria’s had been open. He had known grief then, and pain. Surely Jane wouldn’t be the same.

An image of Loki’s black eyes flickered through his mind again. When he thought of Jane, he thought of it all - the cells, the running, the battle. It haunted him like the first battle of New York, festering in his chest like the memories of Afghanistan. It was a different pain, a different worry, worse because it still had loose ends.

Worse because it still had Loki, who stood with red blood around him and black eyes where green should be.

A voice pulled him abruptly from his thoughts.

“Anthony Edward Stark.”

Tony spared a slow glance over his shoulder, giving a crooked smile to the Queen of Asgard.

“Hey, you.” He went for casual because he knew he wasn’t supposed to, but his heart wasn’t all in it. Standing and giving a sweeping bow, he straightened up to see her smiling.

“It is good to see you in better health.”
“Yeah, the sling’s gone.” He lifted his arm in display. “Not running for my life anymore.” He paused, glancing to the two armed guards standing a few paces away. “Should I be?”

“Peace.” She folded her hands behind her back. Tony remembered Loki used to do the same thing. “My purpose here is twofold, Anthony. Would you walk with me?”

She held out her arm so he might take it, her pointed gaze indicating that, no, he did not have a choice in the matter. The question was merely a courtesy - an illusion. How fitting.

He resigned himself to this and took her arm with a smile, starting a slow walk down the hillside. The guards followed a few respectful paces behind.

“I come to you bearing Asgard’s pardon.” She revealed, glancing at the headstones they passed. “It occurs to me that you do not need it, though. Your trial by worth was successful.”

He laughed a little, feeling lighter with that burden lifted from his shoulders. Not that he had been worrying.

“Just don’t ask me to try it again. Does double jeopardy apply in Asgard?” He pulled his sunglasses out of his pocket, securing them on his face. “I still don’t like you guys.”

Frigga laughed, shaking her head. “I don’t expect you to.”

She paused at an ornate headstone, where a statue of an angel gazed high and stretched an arm heavenward. Veins of moss clung to it, filling in cracks and crevices that time had worn in the stone.

“...Loki came to me some time ago.” She revealed, her voice quiet as she studied a forgotten grave. “I gave him weapons to win this war and bring his brother home. Surely he told you this.”

Tony glanced over his shoulder before nodding. He took her lead and pretended to study the statue too.

“The cube, the scepter, the Ae-”

“Pray that no one hears you.” She interrupted, quick as a whip. “Whatever I lent to my son, I did so with the promise that he would return them to me. With the promise that he would not lure dark magic from its confinement.”

Tony raised a brow in surprise, and then gave a shake of his head and a breathy laugh. What had he expected? Of course there had been some other lie involved with their miraculous weapons acquisition.

The memory of the hollows of Loki’s black eyes returned. Tony quieted as he wondered how far that disease went.

“You thought he might listen to you?”

“He gave his word.” She looked to him, the gravity of this situation expressed in her eyes. “For that reason alone, I fear what persuaded him to break his oath.”

“Well, what is he the god of? Mischief, lies-”

“And yet he never lied to me, Anthony. Not without purpose.” She shook her head, returning her gaze to the angel. Her faith in her son was unwavering, but he knew that Loki would never be
able to get the better of her if he tried. “His future is hidden from me. I scry and ask the runes, but they bear no sure answers. His path is fractured in so many ways, branching out in endless directions.”

Tony decided not to ask. Frigga continued.

“But in all these paths, a darkness looms over his home. My Asgard.”

“Trouble in paradise?” He asked, glancing to her. “Why tell me?”

“Because beyond the darkness, I saw you.”

He quieted and her hand fell from the statue, her full attention turned to him.

“Me.”

“Aye.”

They watched each other for a long moment. Tony couldn’t make any sense of what she had said.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” At least she was honest. “But I feel we may see more of each other, Anthony.”

“Tony.” He corrected, just a little too quickly. “Just Tony.”

She gave him a Mother’s smile, nodding her head with the utmost regality.

“Tony.”

He nodded back. Pulling his arm out from hers, he clapped his hands and took a step back.

“Well, I guess I can’t tell a Queen she can’t have her things back, so-”

She shook her head, letting her hands fall to her sides.

“Keep them. Until I am sure Asgard is safe, I can entrust them to your hands. Odin, however…” she gave a the smallest smile, almost embarrassed. “...he need not know.”

Immediately, Tony was intrigued.

“Thor’s not going to tell him?”

“We’ve spoken at length on the matter. He feels that they are safer here, for now. Under your watch and his, no one will touch them.” He nodded and Frigga cast her eyes down to the funeral. “Speaking of whom, I should be back at his side. Until we meet again, Tony.”

When she turned to leave, exiting his life as quickly as she had entered it, he found himself with the faintest sense of finality. They had just gone full circle, for all but one thing.

“Wait.” When she turned back to look him, he had already thrown caution to the wind. “I should thank you.”

“Oh?” She tilted her head in curiosity, just like Loki would do. He tried not to think about it.

“For taking a chance on me. On him.”
She blinked once, twice, and then gave the slightest smile.

“I can’t say I know what you’re talking about.”

Tony would be damned if he hadn’t seen her wink at him.

The Aether continued to rage through Loki’s veins like fire, ravaging his soul and leaving him hollow. He felt raw and exposed as the power seared through his flesh, but he was drunk on its influence. It was like to consume him.

When he found enough sense to attempt to separate himself from its corruption, it came as little surprise that the ancient force would not simply submit and return to its containment.

If he turned to Asgard for help, Loki knew they could cleanse this blight from his body. Odin would raise his spear and say ancient words to force the darkness into its prison, leaving it to grow stale as it had been before.

Nursing a drink in the dark corners of Knowhere, Loki considered this as he gazed up at the universe. He felt as hollow as this Celestial skull he found refuge in. The green and purple galaxies above glittered as he thought of home, of the nine realms, and of Yggdrasil’s void.

He knew if he returned to Asgard, naught would await him there but the executioner’s axe.

So he turned to others for answers, seeking audience with potential healers and men of knowledge. He soon found himself in the Collector’s odd abode, having heard his name in the black markets of this forsaken land. It was in exchange for a necklace looted from Amora’s corpse that Tanaleer Tivan offered him information.

“What you have is… beauty.” His hands shook as he worshiped the mist hanging around Loki’s shadow. The sorcerer tolerated such attention. “Power.”

“This is information I know, Tivan. Shall I have that necklace back?”

The Collector straightened, clearing his throat as he tucked the white-diamond necklace into his jacket folds. It glowed with the ghost of Amora’s power, and Loki had no need for it.

“What you do not know is that its Master wakes.”

“I am its Master.”

“No, no, no, no, Prince of Chaos, you are its vessel.” The Collector circled him, reaching out to touch the droplets of power. They floated away from him. “Its master is its keeper. The Svartálfar awaken.”

Loki’s eyes snapped to him as his mind broke out in a million thoughts. If the sands of the dark world were shifting, life coursing through its barren heart once more, its people would seek their stolen relic. Their power. It was as the casket was for Jotunheim.

“What remnants they have of their power tell them that their treasure lies in the heart of an Asgardian.” Tivan crooned, unfazed by the dark eyes that were trained on him. “Revenge is what they seek of your people, dark Prince. Whispers say they intend to have it and Asgard’s gold will be bathed in your people’s blood.”
And with this, I only have one more chapter for part one. Thank you for coming along for the ride, and I hope you follow along after I finished "Framed."

Part two will be entitled "Spellbreaker."

Happy Holidays!
Swirling the contents of his glass, Tony leaned against his balcony railing and sighed.

It was dusk. The sun had set and a few stars glimmered in the red and pink sky, just waiting to be snuffed out by the night lights of the city. Tony was dressing for a gala event, his tie slung lazily around his neck and a drink in one hand. He should be practicing his speech instead of drinking, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Voices echoed in his ears.

Fixated, Pepper had guessed. Obsessed, JARVIS hypothesized. Head-over-heels, Clint taunted.

*Drunk before the feast? Your class never fails to inspire.*

It was Loki's voice in his head, mocking and smooth. It wasn't real, just imagined commentary that Tony's mind concocted. With the burn of alcohol in his system it never even occurred to him that this was strange. Further was the thought that he could be in denial about the whole situation. He just kept insisting that he wasn't fixated, that he couldn't be obsessed, and that he definitely was *not* head-over-heels. Tony Stark didn't obsess over people. He just obsessed over himself.

Pushing his hand up and through his hair, he sighed and stared out at the city sprawled before him. After his fiery tango with the Mandarin he had thought that the world might calm down, but then Thor had decided to chase some elf with a spaceship around London. The world had been promptly turned on its head again.

Tony was coming off a three-day workshop bender, his Clean Slate protocol entirely forgotten. Seeing the Aether again had thrown him back into his old habits - familiar dazes of endless nights and sleepless days matched with breathtaking productivity. His newest suit was almost done but still non-operable, featuring a tricked-out Extremis upgrade that made Pepper nervous. Tony had been launched into the medical field when he had tried to de-code her version of the virus, and it had left him with an inexplicable interest. Operations and body modifications, to be specific.

JARVIS was entirely open about sharing his concerns on that particular topic.

Still, the real world called to him. London and Malibu weren’t going to rebuild themselves - relief funds were on their way, thanks to Pepper - and someone needed to pay for the President’s therapy.

*Leave your leader to rot,* Loki would have said. *Let someone stronger take his place. Perhaps myself?*

Tony set down his drink and groaned, rubbing his face with both hands. He tried to focus on shutting out the world for a moment. It wouldn’t work, he knew, but he was buzzed enough that he didn’t care. For one blessed second he wanted to live in a world where aliens didn’t exist, terrorists didn't matter, and superheroes stayed in comic books. Maybe then he could forget about other realms. Maybe he could even forget about Loki's damn smirk.

Yeah, right.

His hands fell to the railing and his gaze shifted to the ground as he tried to collect himself. It was there that he caught sight of the briefcase sitting at his feet and he groaned again. Resistance was futile. Covering his eyes with one hand, he surrendered to the truth of his ridiculous life.
The Infinity Gauntlet was not stowed away in some safe, as many might suspect. There were no
top-secret vaults or security systems to safeguard it. There was just an expensive leather briefcase
and some padding protecting the most dangerous weapon in the nine realms (as Thor called it). It
went everywhere Tony did. No one knew what was stowed away in his briefcase or why he was
so protective of it - well, Pepper probably knew, but she was contractually obligated to keep his
every secret for as long as she lived. He thought it was safer at his side instead of being locked
away somewhere, just waiting to get taken-

He was abruptly shocked out of his thoughts by the sound of an explosion, which rocked the
tower and sent it into the slightest sway. Tony had the briefcase in hand by the time a half-suited
Steve came rushing out onto the balcony below, heading towards the quinjet as he tried to yank on
his last boot. He was barking orders into his earpiece and Natasha darted around him, ducking in
the aircraft to get to the pilot’s seat.

In the distance, an ominous plume of black and purple smoke rose up from the business district.
Tony could already see flashing police lights and beginnings of chaos. His mind was racing,
JARVIS was chattering away in his ear and drowning out Steve; Tony was ready to jump in the
quinjet and help, with or without a suit.

And then the world came to screeching halt.

Literally.

Steve stood still like a marble statue, paused in his run. Natasha was frozen mid-climb into the
quinjet and Tony thought he could see Clint standing at door below. The smoke in the distance
neither rose nor shifted in the wind, looking like a painting rather than his reality. JARVIS had
gone quiet.

“Hello.”

He stumbled to the side and caught himself on a rail, jolted out of his confusion by a woman’s
voice. His grip was iron tight on the handle of his briefcase and his knuckles whitened as he
turned to face the intruder.

A woman stood overlooking their city, leaning forward against the railing. In a single glance Tony
tried to take her all in, but he quickly found that to be a tall order. She was otherworldly.

Asgardian, Tony realized abruptly. A freakishly tall Asgardian woman, with an ass that could kill
and cheekbones that could cut a man in half. The way her green eyes bore into his soul made him
uncomfortable, as if ice were gathering where the arc reactor had been. She reminded him of Loki.
Fucking hell.

“You know, I appreciate the dimensional time warp, but-”

She continued to look at him out of the corner of her eye, not moving her head in the slightest. She
was perfectly profile in posture, the lingering light of the golden hour highlighting her attributes.
He felt the wit on his tongue die, though whether it was out of awe or fear he wasn't sure.

“...Who are you?”

“I am Hela.” she answered, her voice like a ghost in a hall, “And Loki is in the balance between
his realm and mine.”

Tony’s brow furrowed. Loki? Not likely. No one had heard from him and if anyone was going to,
Tony was damn well sure it was going to be himself.

_Until next we meet, Stark._

Loki would come to him first, right?

Then again, it was safe to assume that this woman had just bombed the city with some mystical-magical bullshit on a Loki-like scale. Maybe it made more sense that she would know where he was.

“What d’you want from me?”

“Nothing.” She looked out to the city, away from him. “I am here to kill you.”

He barked a laugh, torn between nerves and numbness. She threatened him like she was commenting on the weather.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, babe, but I’m not easy to kill.”

“That I’ve seen.” she murmured. “But all those times you’ve had those suits of yours, have you not?”

He stilled, swallowing through the lump in his throat. All right, she knew about that. Of course she knew about that. That only made sense, but he wasn’t useless without the suit - if JARVIS couldn’t remotely activate one, he had the gauntlet. It would be a last ditch effort; he’d have to get the case open first and the thing on before she realized, and-

“I can smell your mind roasting from here, Stark.” she said, her voice uncomfortably dry. “Do stop thinking so hard.”

Hela stood straight and dusted off her purple robes. She seemed regal in the way she carried herself, her back straight and chin high. It was the same as Loki's demeanor - confident and superior, almost too much so.

“You won't use the Infinity Gauntlet against me, Anthony.” Hela looked down, adjusting the decorative bands around her wrists. “Understand that I do not come here out of spite, or misplaced revenge. In fact, my purpose is quite the opposite.”

It was then she turned to face him for the first time, and Tony felt all the blood drain out of his face. With a turn and sweep of dark fabric she revealed herself, offering him a crooked half-smile that was somehow beautiful even as he felt bile rise in his throat.

“Like what you see?”

Hela stood before him as half a woman and half a shadow, the entire left side of her body nothing more than bones and wisps of blackness. Half-alive and half-dead, the left side of her face was nothing more than the curves that made an ivory skull. What could only be described as a black light resided in a hollow eye socket, changing and rolling as her flesh-eye moved. Everything else that was not concealed by her robes was skeletal, weeping shadows and darkness with every movement. This woman was half angel, half devil.

In short, Hela was a nightmare.

“All who come to my hall are welcome.” She decreed, stepping towards him with a deafening crack of her bones. For the first time in his life, he felt frozen to his spot. “But not those who come early.”
She was too close then, her flesh hand splayed across his chest, resting over the mess of bones and scars where the arc reactor was. He thought he felt his heart grow smaller, but that could have been his stomach climbing up into his throat.

“All it would take is a touch.” Her skeletal hand rose up and hovered next to his cheek, tracing through the air down to his jugular. “A touch and you would be gone, Anthony Stark, to linger my halls for eternity.”

He managed to find his voice somewhere through the overwhelming fear and confusion, pushing through it all with whatever courage he had left.

“What are you?”

“I am death.” Her voice changed then, demanding he pay attention despite its soft tones. Her solid hand gripped the fabric of his shirt tight. “Listen well. The fates have been disturbed, Stark, and I seek to right them. Loki is between his world and mine…”

His world. Hers.

Life and death.

“...and it's not his time to be there. He will burn when Asgard does, and no sooner.”

“What does killing me have to do with any of that?”

“I am going to kill you because you are under the protection of Odin’s throne.”

His eyes widened and he heard the joints of her hand move, falling close to his skin and bringing death in its wake.

“Find him.”

Terror burned white-hot and a blinding light erupted between them. Tony felt himself displaced in reality, and then he was pulled from one realm to the next.

Chapter End Notes

Please continue on to Part II...

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