

Lessons, Loki-Style

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Lessons, Loki-Style

by [SailorChibi](#)

Summary

You know those stories where the team wishes Tony didn't exist and they end up transported to a world where he doesn't, and then they come back with a complete change of heart?

Yeah, this is what happens afterwards: when the team suddenly starts appreciating a very confused Tony.

Notes

I like fics where the team gets sent to a Tony-less world as much as anyone else, but I always wondered what happened after. Surely Tony would think the sudden attitude change is suspicious?

I have to be honest: I literally had two versions of this for *months*. One was pre-Civil War and meant to be Stuckony, and the other was post-Civil War and FrostIron, and I liked them both so much for different reasons I had no idea which one to choose. I was all set to go pre-CW until I started seeing the commercials for Civil War coming out on DVD. That kinda ruined my Stuckony fun. Hence, FrostIron for the first time ever.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Tony's first inkling that something is wrong is when Bucky hugs him.

Well, actually that's not true. He's the first to admit that he doesn't see it coming, mostly because he and Bucky get along best when they're ignoring each other's existence. So when he walks into the kitchen in search of coffee, because Pepper is a cruel mistress who stole the last of the coffee out of the workshop and forbid both JARVIS and FRIDAY from ordering any more until Tony surfaced for at least twelve hours, and Bucky grabs him, his first thought is that his actions in yesterday's fight pissed Bucky off and now he's about to die.

When Bucky *hugs him* instead, his brain crashes. He stops struggling (because ow, that shit hurts) and stands very still, eyeing the rest of the team over Bucky's metal shoulder. In the cold light of day, his stomach sinks at just how bad they all look, destroying any enjoyment he might've gotten out of the moment.

The human members of the team - Natasha, Clint, Sam and Wanda – are all covered in bruises and scrapes from head to toe. Natasha's sprained both wrists. Clint is nursing a dislocated shoulder. Sam's got a fractured right forearm. Wanda badly sprained her left ankle. And that's just what Tony can see. There's no doubt in his mind that they're probably hiding more injuries underneath their clothing. On top of that, he knows that Steve, Bucky, Bruce and Vision would look the same if it weren't for their extraordinary abilities.

Honestly, he didn't think last night's battle had gone *that* badly. Seeing the truth painted on his teammate's flesh is sickening, and for a split second he'd deeply grateful that Rhodey is away on his honeymoon with Carol. No wonder they're all staring at him. They're probably hoping that Bucky will finish the job. He squirms uncomfortably, wanting nothing more than to flee the room, but goes very still again when Bucky's grip tightens in response.

"Um," Tony says very intelligently, "is this some new way of killing people? Because you should know that Pepper will probably try to avenge me, and no offence but she'd kick your ass."

"Probably?" Natasha asks, lifting a sculpted eyebrow.

Tony shrugs and then winces. Ow. "She's still mad at me for missing a bunch of meetings," he says. He's not overly worried; Pepper is mad at him roughly 80% of the time, and her anger (probably) won't end in him dying. Not like the assassin currently wrapped around him. He looks at Steve pleadingly.

Steve takes mercy on him and steps forward, prying Bucky off with ease. "It's okay," he says, and Tony's not sure if he's talking to Bucky or Tony or the room in general. Bucky shudders, glancing at Tony from under his lashes, and is that - okay, Tony has to be reading this situation wrong, there's *no way* Bucky is looking at him wistfully.

"It's okay?" Tony echoes, confused, and then his mouth runs away like always. "As in... you don't want to give me a lecture about how I should be more careful when it comes to following team orders, and how it was me being reckless than nearly killed a bunch of people, and that all of this" he jerks a thumb at the rest of the team "is my fault?"

"No," Steve says simply. He's looking at Tony weirdly too, but not wistfully. If Tony didn't know better, he'd say Steve looks haunted.

"No?" Tony repeats.

"No."

"I... are you feeling okay, Cap? Normally you're itching to read me the riot act after a mission. Not that I'm complaining, trust me, there's a reason I hide out in my workshop instead of attending Fury's irritating debriefs. Well, that and the fact that Fury is just about the last person I want to listen to when I've got -" He cuts himself off too slow, because Bruce has already zeroed in on him.

"You have what?" he asks, eyes narrowing, and this is why everyone ignores him when Bruce says he's not that kind of doctor. Only doctors have that special, disturbing talent at making Tony want to climb out a window to escape.

Well, doctors and Agent Coulson when he's pissed off. And board meetings. And Pepper on the warpath. Okay, Tony will climb out the window to avoid a lot of things, especially now that he's got bracelets to call the suit to him, but doctors are definitely up there on the list.

"Nothing," Tony says quickly. "I'm fine."

"FRIDAY?" Bruce calls out.

"Boss has three cracked ribs, a bruised shoulder, a sprained ankle, and a mild concussion," FRIDAY answers readily enough. She likes Bruce a little too much, in Tony's expert opinion.

"Traitor," Tony mutters, uncomfortable with how quickly all eyes return to him. He doesn't know how to read their expressions, which definitely means it's time for a strategic retreat. Especially if Steve has granted him a reprieve on the whole lecture thing. Tony's not going to look a gift horse in the mouth on that one.

Not without coffee, though. He shuffles over to the coffeemaker, which has already brewed a pot of his favorite coffee, and pours himself a mug. He starts to turn to the cupboard to grab the sugar, only to find that Natasha has fetched it already, while Clint's brought him the milk from the refrigerator. Which is, huh. The very opposite of what normally happens when Tony comes for coffee.

Slowly, he takes both sugar and milk and adds them to his coffee. Maybe they're poisoned. It's kind of tempting to pour the coffee down the sink and go without, but that would be a waste of coffee. Also, he's not sure that Natasha wouldn't stab him for the implication. He gives his cup a quick stir, sets the spoon in the sink and backs towards the door. Best not to turn his back to anyone just in case.

"Okay, good talk," he says, ducking out the door. As he limps down the hall, he has FRIDAY perform a quick scan of the coffee. It comes back negative for any known poisons or toxins. Hmm. Surely Vision wouldn't help them figure out a brand new poison to use, would he?

"Tony!" Bruce catches up to him just as Tony gets to the elevator. "Please, can I give you a quick check just to make sure you're okay?"

"FRIDAY says I'm fine."

"I know, but..." Bruce is tense, unusually so. "Please?"

Tony eyes him over his cup of coffee, but it's Bruce and he's desperate for their friendship to get back to even close to where it used to be, so finally he shrugs. "Yeah, okay. Whatever."

"Thanks." The strained smile on Bruce's face remains during the trip up to Bruce's lab and all throughout the check-up. It's nothing short of awkward. Tony keeps his mouth shut until Bruce is done poking at his ribs (seriously, *ow*) and only speaks up once he's got his shirt safely back on.

"Seriously, did I miss something?" he asks. "Because all of you are being weird. Weirder than usual. I fucked up big time last night. Steve should be yelling at me, but instead he hasn't said a word. And who can forget when Bucky... you know what, let's forget it." He's not that desperate for human contact that he'll confess to enjoying a hug with Bucky.

Goddamn. He really needs Loki to hurry up and come back from wherever he's gone off to.

Bruce straightens up and looks him in the face. "It was a long night."

"A long night?" Tony repeats, baffled, because that explains exactly nothing. He spent the whole night in the workshop, of course, but he's pretty sure he would remember something out of the ordinary happening. "Bruce, is this - are you upset because of what the Hulk did, because it was totally my fault, I was the one who -"

"No. Tony, no. That's not it. I..." Bruce trails off. He takes a deep breath and very deliberately sets a hand on Tony's arm. "I'm just glad you're okay."

Tony stares at the point of contact between them. He can't remember the last time that Bruce actually reached out to anyone on the team, much less Tony himself. It might have been two months ago, when Wanda tripped coming down the steps and Bruce caught her so that she didn't fall down three flights. Normally Bruce keeps to himself, and any contact is always initiated by someone else. This is basically the Bruce equivalent of what just happened in the kitchen, and it's seriously starting to freak Tony out.

"I'm fine," he says, pasting on a fake smile to cover up the alarm. "You know me, I have armor to protect me. Nothing gets through that."

Bruce smiles too, a little too tightly to be real, and squeezes Tony's arm. "Yeah, I know."

"... Okay," Tony says when the silence has dragged on a little too long to be comfortable. "So I'm going to go work on said armor."

"If you start feeling off, let me know."

"Will do." Tony stands up and limps towards the door. He casts a quick glance over his shoulder as he walks into the elevator; Bruce is standing with his head down, feet spaced evenly apart, hands hanging loose at his sides, taking slow, deep breaths. It's not an unfamiliar pose, but something about it nevertheless strikes Tony as odd.

"FRIDAY," he says as the doors swish shut. "Has anyone on the team left the building since last night?"

"No Boss."

"Not even Barnes?"

"My records indicate that the team has been present in the tower since your return last night at 8pm. They all slept in their beds, save for Vision and Wanda, who slept on the couch in the living room."

She used to call it the "family" room. Tony got her out of that habit pretty quick.

"Interesting," Tony mutters, more to himself than FRIDAY, though he's still not sure what, exactly, is going on. Something about the team is definitely off. Normally they collectively treat Tony with something only a few shades warmer than outright disdain. He can't remember the last time Natasha willingly fetched him the sugar, probably because he's 99.99% sure it never happened. Why would she do it now, when by all rights she should want to stab him?

It's something he should probably give more thought to, but then he gets to the workshop and the armor - his poor armor - is in need of so much repair that it takes every iota of Tony's concentration. He spends a solid sixty-eight hours in the workshop hunched over his suit, alternating between fixing it, working on the newer model, and bickering with FRIDAY, and only emerges when his back is begging for mercy. By that point, he's forgotten all about the team's odd behavior.

But that's not the end of it.

Bucky takes to shadowing him during all following battles, and during at least three of those battles he knocks out several dozen enemies that Tony could've easily taken. Then he gives Tony the puppy eyes when Tony tries to confront him about it, like he has no idea what Tony's talking about, which is just plain bullshit. Steve fusses over him when Tony gets injured again – though that's par for the course really, seeing as how Steve is a gigantic mother hen - but even more so than normal.

Following the third battle, even Fury starts looking confused.

Then Natasha cooks a very complicated Russian meal and brings some down to the workshop for him, which a) she has never in her life brought him food and b) she has certainly never brought him food she's personally cooked. It smells and tastes so good that Tony very seriously considers offering her a million dollars to become his private chef, but doesn't because he values his life.

Tony usually takes the chair alone during movie nights; if Loki is there, nine times out of ten he ends up in Loki's lap or vice versa, because Loki is a complete chair hog. Natasha or Clint will take the huge chair and the other one will sprawl on the floor in front of said chair, beside Wanda and Vision. Thor, if he's around, always claims the loveseat, and if he's not then that's where Wanda and Vision sit. Bruce will sometimes join Bucky or Steve on the couch, but more often he opts to sit on the floor with Sam.

The very next movie night they have, he walks in to see that Bruce is in his chair and the only empty spot is on the couch beside Bucky and Steve. Tony hesitates, because that has bad idea written all over it, but Steve spots him before he can sneak away. One premium set of puppy eyes later - and Tony isn't even sure why that still works on him - he's sitting stiffly beside Steve. He doesn't even remember what movie they watch because he's so focused on making sure that he and Steve don't touch.

It happens again the second week.

Then there's the fact that Steve is running interference with Pepper and Fury so that Tony actually has a few seconds to breathe every now and then. Natasha and Bucky are acting like protective stalkers; Tony catches them both tailing him whenever he leaves the tower for a board meeting. Wanda actually smiles at him a handful of times, which for her is the equivalent of Barnes hugging him. The first time it happens, Tony walks into a wall.

Clint hasn't pranked him in like three weeks and actually offers to share his doughnuts when Tony stumbles out of the workshop after a binge; when he brings the rest of the Barton family around, he doesn't sneer or pretend to gag when Lila calls him "Uncle Tony".

Sam and Vision are the only ones who act halfway normally, and that's because the tension in Tony's and Vision's relationship is all on Tony's side, and Sam's the only mature adult in the whole Avengers team. Tony takes solace in that right up until Sam actually brings him Redwing and politely asks for an upgrade, even offers to discuss the possibility of an artificial intelligence.

Sam *never* lets anyone touch Redwing.

"What the hell is going on with all of you?" Tony bursts out finally.

Bruce startles. "Huh? What?"

"You heard me." Tony points an accusing finger at him. It's not like he minds that Bruce has made it a point to spend more time with him, instead of spending increasing amounts of time out on 'errands' (also known as finally getting up the nerve to spend time with Natasha again, but that's beside the point). Their experiments are always fun and honestly, Tony has desperately missed hanging out with his science bro. But that doesn't change how weird it is.

"Tony, I'm not sure what you're talking about." Bruce pushes his glasses up and squints.

"Hang on, what time is it?"

"Just past 4pm on Tuesday, the 7th, Doctor Banner," says FRIDAY.

"Don't change the subject," Tony says at the same time.

"What subject?" Bruce looks honestly bewildered, and Tony throws his arms up.

"That's it. I'm going to bed."

"You're willingly going to bed? In the middle of an experiment? Are you sick?"

"I'm not, but I'm starting to wonder about the rest of you." Tony is aiming for flippancy, but knows it falls flat. Thank god Bruce isn't really paying attention anymore, concentration already wandering back to the microscope. Tony still pouts at him for a few seconds before sliding quietly off his stool and leaving the lab.

He lied. He's not really going to bed. He has his own project that he's been working on over the past few weeks: project "What the Fuck is Wrong With my Teammates". So far, his working theory is that everyone has been replaced by an alien or that they're all playing some epically cruel practical joke on him as revenge. The sad thing is, Tony honestly can't tell which one would be worse at this point.

Because. Because fuck, he *likes* the attention, okay? It's nice to feel like he's actually part of the team, as opposed to the team's main source of funding that no one actually likes. He likes hanging out during movie night like everyone actually wants him there. He likes cooking with Natasha and learning more about Russia and the food she enjoys; he likes spending more time with Bruce; he likes not having Wanda look at him like he's scum on the bottom of her shoe; he likes chatting with Sam about potential upgrades; he definitely likes not having to wonder if water or whipped cream is going to come out of the shower at 5am.

He's just not sure what - if anything - he did to deserve it, which means that the likelihood of this turning into one of the two aforementioned scenarios is perilously high.

He's *pretty* sure this isn't a joke. It's been going for like two months now, and Clint – at least – isn't patient enough for that. Also, this doesn't seem like the kind of thing that Bruce or Steve would go along with, even if it was just for the sake of team unity. Which leads to the other option.

"Anything?"

"No Boss," FRIDAY says. "My scan of Dr. Banner suggests that there is no difference to his genetic structure when compared to the scan that was taken three months ago."

"Damn," Tony mutters, running his hands through his hair. He hates to ask. "FRIDAY, has there been any message from Loki?"

"I'm afraid not."

Tony closes his eyes briefly. "Of course not," he says under his breath. It hurts, but he doesn't want to think about that right now. "Of course he wouldn't be around right now when I need him, because I don't think these assholes are even my teammates!"

"Boss?"

“Get Fury on the line for me.”

“Stark?” Fury’s voice fills the room a moment later. “There better be an emergency if you’re calling at 11pm.”

“Don’t even try to pretend you were sleeping,” Tony says.

“That’s not the point. What?”

“Have you noticed anything weird about the team lately?”

There’s a considerable pause, then Fury says, “I’d ask if you’d been drinking, but that’s a normal state of mind for you.”

Tony sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose in the hopes of staving off a headache. “I’m serious.”

“No, Stark, I haven’t. Why?”

Faced with actually articulating the problem to another person, words fail Tony like they’ve never failed him before. He can’t do it. He can’t sit here and tell Nick Fury that the rest of the team is being too nice to him, and it’s freaking him out. Fury will never let him hear the end of sounding like a five-year-old.

“Stark?” Fury prompts when the silence drag on a little too long.

“It’s nothing,” he says finally. “Ignore it. Talk to you later.” He ends the call before Fury can say anything else and ignores it when Fury immediately calls back. He’ll figure this out on his own.

The reasonable thing to do, of course, would be to ask the team what’s going on, but Tony can’t do that. If they are imposters, they’ll lie to his face and then know Tony’s on to them. If they’re not, they’ll think he’s crazy. Or worse, they’ll feel sorry for him. Neither option is particularly appealing. No, Tony is just going to have to figure this out some other way.

Things don’t improve. He gets invited to a cooking session that involves Natasha, Laura and Clint; it turns out that Clint is an exceptional baker, which is knowledge that Tony never needed to know. Wanda actually sits beside him at movie night. Tony receives an invitation to a science symposium and when he ask Bruce to come, already knowing that the answer will be no, Bruce actually says yes.

Steve, very casually, asks him if he wants to go to a baseball game, and then Sam and Bucky just happen to show up at the stadium, and before Tony knows it, he’s surrounded by people that, by all rights, should hate his guts.

That’s the last straw. Well, no, actually the last straw is right after a battle a week later, almost a full three months since the team collectively lost their minds, when Tony turns around and sees the Barton children standing beside Maria Hill. Putting aside the fact that this isn’t a safe place for kids, Lila squeals and starts running towards her father and something in Tony just *snaps*.

“Hey,” he says. “Lila, no! That’s not your dad!”

Sam looks at him like he’s crazy. Tony ignores him, pushing through the crowd – gotta love the armor, even if it's for nothing more than its ability to get people out of the way – and physically removing Lila from Clint's arms.

"Dude, what the hell?" Clint says.

"Uncle Tony!" Lila says joyously.

Tony snaps the faceplate up and glares at him, half-turning so that Lila is out of reach. “It was one thing when it was just me, but I won’t let you fuck with innocent people,” he says. “I know you’re not Clint.”

"Language," Steve calls out.

“What are you talking about?” Hill says, already wearing that look that means she’s not going to like what she hears. Normally Tony would accuse her of jumping to conclusions, but in this case she is completely right. She’s not going to like it.

“I think the team has been replaced with either Hydra agents or aliens. I haven't been able to figure out which yet,” Tony says, speaking directly to Hill and ignoring the scattered sounds of protest and outrage behind him.

Hill’s posture changes slightly, a new tension in her shoulders, but that’s the only sign of any discomfort. “Can you disprove this?” she asks, giving the team as a whole a hard look. Behind her, several SHIELD agents lift their guns just a little.

“No one can use my powers,” Wanda says; her hands flare with a red light, which never fails to make Tony feel a little ill.

“And I’m pretty sure no one else can turn into the Hulk,” Bruce adds.

Damn. Tony’s had way too many sleepless nights if he didn’t think of that.

“I’m sure blood tests would prove the rest,” says Natasha. “But I’m curious to know Tony’s reasoning behind this.” She pins him with a hard look, but it’s a shadow of the threatening stares he used to get and maybe that, more than anything, is what finally tips him over the edge.

“It's because you’re being *nice* to me!” he bursts out.

“What?” Steve says, eyes wide.

“About three months ago, all of you started acting completely different. You and Bucky and Sam keeping trying to spend time with me and Wanda actually smiles at me now and Natasha doesn’t threaten me and has started cooking me food instead, and Bruce –“ He forces himself stop, because it all wants to spill out, and settles for a low, desperate, “It’s weird. I don’t know what’s going on, but you’ve changed.”

“And your first thought to us being nice to you was that we were replaced by *aliens*?” Clint says, staring at him.

Tony shrugs, though he’s not sure how well it translates through the suit. “I also wondered if you were just playing a mean joke, but frankly you don’t have the patience to keep any joke going for this long.”

Clint frowns. “Hey!”

“He’s right,” Natasha tells him.

“Still.”

“I think,” Hill says, “that this is a conversation best held somewhere other than in public. Come on.”

They end up back in the debriefing room at SHIELD. Everyone else has been sneaking looks in Tony’s direction the whole time; he ignores them all, too desperate for an answer to really care. If they’re not aliens and it’s not a joke, then why?

“Alright. I want to know what the hell is going on,” Fury says, crossing his arms and glaring.

Bruce and Natasha exchange a glance. So do Bucky and Steve, and Wanda and Sam. Clint looks at the ceiling like it’s fascinating. Vision stares at the floor. No one says a word.

Fury slams a hand down on the table. “That was not a request!”

“Three months ago, after the battle with Amora,” Vision says in an unusually subdued voice. “I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we were... frustrated with how the battle went.”

“You mean you were all pissed off at me,” Tony says flatly. Even putting aside all of the shit from the accords, which still flares up now and then, no one like his relationship, such as it is, with Loki. Foes from Asgard tend to bring all of that to the surface.

Vision nods after a moment. “I believe that would be an appropriate term. After you went to the workshop, the rest of us had a brief conversation.” He stops, looking deeply uncomfortable. It’s unusual enough for Vision that Tony squirms impatiently, wanting to shake him until the answers fall out.

“About?” Fury says impatiently.

Again, they all look at each other.

“FRIDAY,” Tony says, something cold gripping his stomach. He’s done with this. “Play back the audio for that night.”

“As you wish, Boss,” FRIDAY says clearly through the speakers in the ceiling.

“Damn it, Stark,” Fury mutters, but it’s lost beneath the sound of Clint’s voice.

“Jesus, that was just a train wreck of epic proportions. Ow!”

“Sorry, but if you’d stay still,” Bruce says, annoyed.

“Or you could not jab me with needles!”

“Don’t yell at Bruce. It’s not his fault,” Steve says.

“No, it’s Tony’s.”

Tony flinches a little, not that he’s surprised by the venom in Clint’s voice. That night really was a massive fuck-up.

“Clint –”

“It’s true, Bucky, and you know it.”

The resulting silence says it all. Then –

“You know what, sometimes I wish Tony just didn’t exist. Or that he wasn’t part of the team. It would make life easier.”

There are varying murmurs of assent from every member of the team, particularly Wanda, but the one who actually said those hurtful words was Natasha. Tony glances at her, catches the stiffening of her shoulders, and hastily looks down at the floor. There’s a reason Natasha is so prized for her ability to blend in just about anywhere; she can say far more with a raised eyebrow than most people can with whole paragraphs. He doesn’t want to see her face, and he doesn’t want anyone else to see him.

“Ow, shit!” Clint yelps again.

“And you’re done. Now I’m going to bed.”

The audio cuts out after Bruce’s announcement, leaving a heavy silence until Vision clears his throat.

“We were unaware,” he says, voice heavy with guilt, “that Loki had followed us and was listening.”

Tony just barely bites back the hurt “Loki was in the tower?!” that wants to come out. He hasn’t seen Loki since before that battle; he and Amora got into it heavily, and Loki ended up pushing her through some kind of portal and following suit. Up until now, Tony’s convinced himself that Loki is off chasing her to the ends of the galaxy. Now, his chest hurts in a way that has very little to do with his anxiety.

“He decided to grant our wish,” Vision finishes.

“Grant your wish?” Fury repeats, exchanging a look with Hill. “Care to elaborate?”

“We were all sent to a world where there was no Tony Stark,” Bucky snaps. “And it was fucking awful, alright?” His face is haunted. “I wasn’t – I’m pretty sure I’m the one who killed him,” he breathes, gaze going distant with a horror no one else can see.

“Buck,” Steve says quietly, touching his arm.

“To begin with, technology was nowhere near where it is now,” says Bruce, not looking at Tony. “Stane owned Stark Industries and the company was the leading weapons supplier to just about anyone who would pay the price. You can imagine the collateral damage since he didn’t have to hide from anyone and had no one willing to shut him down -”

"My family was dead." Wanda doesn't look at Tony either. She stares straight ahead. "My country burned when I was a child. My parents sold their souls to get me out. My family, and my brother, burned along with it. Collateral damage." She spits the word out and Tony feels numb from head to toe.

"Fortunately, in our case, that didn't matter much," Bruce says, glancing worriedly at Wanda. "SHIELD still pulled us all together. But there was no one to fly that nuke through the portal. New York... it didn't exist anymore in that world. The whole island and surrounding areas, several thousand miles of people – just gone." He's trying to sound flat, but there's an undercurrent in his voice. "The radiation fall out was astonishing. Nothing to stop the Chitauri, either."

“Tash and I were still with SHIELD,” Clint says suddenly. “Or what was left of it. The helicarrier crashed and a lot of people died. My family...” He sounds choked with raw grief.

Hill's frowning. "What about Hydra?"

Natasha says, “It's hard to be sure. It was just... just non-stop. Not enough people. We were together.” She indicates herself, Steve and Clint. “But I was...” She trails off and rubs at her right arm. “I was useless. For weeks, I was *useless*.”

“I was locked up,” Bruce says distantly. “In a room so small, I couldn’t even turn around. Ross had me. Every morning he would come to me and smile, and I couldn’t run.”

"I did not exist," Vision says. It's hard to tell whether the idea bothers him or not.

"Pretty sure I was dead," Sam says. "I remember dying with my troop way before we should have. Shoddy tech." He tries for a smile that doesn't come out right.

“Hammer,” Steve says, “was working with Vanko, producing weapons to sell to Stane Industries. Bucky was still the Winter Soldier. I had nothing.” He pauses for a moment, and then repeats, “I had *nothing*. The Steve Rogers in the other world? Understood nothing about the modern age. He didn’t even have a phone. Could barely talk to people. Had no friends. I think he might have tried to kill himself.”

Tony’s head snaps up, and he meets Steve’s gaze, seeing the horror there. The fear.

"Tony," Steve says pleadingly. He's shaking. "We weren't playing a joke. We – *I* suddenly realized how fucking lucky we are to have you. Because a world without you wasn't worth living in."

It's too much. Tony can't stand here and keep listening to this. So he doesn't. He turns around and walks out, numb to his core, and then takes off through the nearest window. No one tries to stop him, not that Tony would care if they tried. Just to be certain, he shuts down all communication to the armor and, when he makes it back to the tower, completely blacks out his floor and shuts down all access codes except for Rhodey's.

But there is one person in Tony's life who has never followed the rules. Ever. He's not surprised in the slightest to see the familiar figure reclining on his bed when he makes it to the bedroom. Loki looks up from the book he's reading with wide-eyed surprise, clad only in the emerald green dressing gown he likes to leave in the most inconvenient places, as though he has no idea why Tony is literally stumbling into the room. Tony stares back at him for approximately two seconds before a sharp nausea pierces through the numbness. Bile rises in his throat. He breaks the staring contest to duck into the bathroom.

There's not much in his stomach to come with; he vomits coffee and bile until there's nothing left to come up, then spends a couple of minutes gagging on nothing. A cool hand curls around his forehead from behind. In spite of himself, Tony leans into the feeling. Loki's not experienced with healing. It's not his forté - his words, not Tony's. Yet Tony feels the icy sweep of magic, and his stomach settles to the point where he feels comfortable leaning backwards. If that puts him squarely against Loki, well. He's been in worse places.

"Why?" he says, closing his eyes. "Why would you - "

"They needed to understand," Loki says quietly. Here, like this, when it's just the two of them, he's never postured the way he does in front of everyone else. There is a ring of truth to that one sentence that makes Tony deeply uncomfortable.

"Everything was fine."

"No it wasn't. They tolerated you, but they didn't appreciate you."

"Same difference."

"Is it?" Loki asks rhetorically, and then, "You wouldn't let me kill them -"

" - because killing is wrong - "

" - so I had to teach them a lesson."

" and you know that, I know you know that." Tony turns his head, catching a hint of a smirk on Loki's face, right before Loki leans in to kiss him. Tony lets the kiss go on for longer than he should, breaking it to mutter, "You shouldn't have done that. What if that world had been better because I wasn't around? What then?"

"I am not sure whether to be ashamed or embarrassed that you believe my plans are so poorly thought out." Loki draws him effortlessly to his feet. Tony goes with him, lets Loki tow him over to the bed so that he can sit down on the edge. He's still wearing his flight suit, while Loki is wearing the dressing gown and little else.

"The way they looked," Tony says after a long pause, and he can't make himself continue. It's a little bit gratifying, though it's horrifying to think that he's finding pleasure in whatever his team suffered through. No wonder they all looked so awful that first morning he stumbled into the kitchen. How long were they trapped in that other world for? He thinks about asking Loki, but the words lock up in his throat. Part of him thinks that no amount of time would be enough, and the other half thinks that any amount of time is too long.

It's very tiring, constantly being at war with yourself.

Loki chuckles against him, dark and amused, and backs off, sprawling out on the bed. "They take you for granted," he says with the edge of old, buried anger. "Even though you give so much of yourself. I had an opportunity and I took it. Really, you can thank your dear Miss Romanov for giving me the idea in the first place. Had it not been for her creativity, I'm not sure my mind would've gone there."

"You probably would've done worse," Tony mutters, twisting to look at him. Loki grins, utterly unrepentant, and against his will Tony smiles back. It's like a cat. You know you shouldn't give them an inch because they'll take a whole mile and then some, but you also can't help yourself.

"It worked, did it? Their attitude has changed. Your efforts are appreciated now."

"What I would've appreciated is a heads up, before I started thinking everyone has been kidnapped and replaced by aliens or Hydra."

"I was enjoying your confusion," Loki says after a pause, and it's the kind of thing where he knows he shouldn't be saying it because it's not great, but he's being honest so it's hard to get mad.

"You're an asshole," Tony says, not without warmth, and drops his head into his hands. Suddenly the past few months make a lot of sense. The mystery's been solved and he's fucking exhausted, right down to his bones. He probably shouldn't admit it, but missing Loki has almost been the hardest part about this whole mess. He doesn't like it when they're separated for a long time; it makes him nervous in a way he can't express, and that's shitty because sometimes the only armor Tony has left is words.

"Ah, but an asshole who saw your worth long before anyone else."

"Like that makes it better." Wearily, Tony stands up and peels his flight suit off. He's sticky and sweaty and probably should shower, but screw it. He opts to climb onto the bed and curl up beside Loki, pressing his hot face into the pointy curve of Loki's collarbone. Loki always runs cold, and right now it feels nice. Maybe it's his imagination, but he swears that he feels lips pressing briefly against his temple.

"I did you a favor. The least you could do is thank me," Loki says, all smarmy charm, and Tony snorts.

"I'm not pushing you out of bed after you did magic on the team, even though you expressly promised me you wouldn't. Be grateful for that."

".... I had my fingers crossed?"

Just for that, Tony does push him out of bed. Loki doesn't hit the floor, the magical bastard; he stops a few inches from the ground and stretches luxuriously in mid-air. Tony hates the fact that even now, his eyes automatically track to where the robe has fallen open, revealing a pale thigh and a few curls of dark hair.

"Get back up here and stop showing off," he says, laying back down. It's been weeks since they had sex and normally that would have him jumping Loki, but tonight he's not in the mood.

The team wished he would disappear. They hated him that much. That they see the error of their ways (and honestly Tony's not so sure they were really wrong) means very little when he remembers how they came across that information. He knew that things weren't fully settled, of course, but it still hurts. He thought he'd come to terms with the fact that the team would never really like him, but apparently not.

Loki's light weight settles next to him. He props himself up on his arm and asks, "Will you forgive them?"

"I don't know."

"You shouldn't."

"Not all of us are capable of hating our fa - friends," Tony says, correcting himself at the last second. Loki's eyes narrow, indicating that he caught the slip. Tony looks away. The team isn't his family. At one time he thought they were, but not anymore. It's just hard to remind himself of that when they've been so damn nice over the past three months.

"They are sucking up to you," Loki says slowly, "because they are afraid of what your loss in their lives would mean. They might appreciate your value, but that doesn't mean they appreciate *you*."

Tony's eyes burn. He covers his face with a hand. "I know." It comes out way more choked than he wants it to. "But... fuck it all. I still want them to like me."

"You Midgardians. So fragile," Loki breathes, wrapping himself around Tony. He's got this way of being all sneaky about it, so that Tony doesn't even realize how surrounded he is until a sob shudders through his whole body and Loki's grip tightens in response.

"I know. I'm weak," Tony says, trying for humor, but it comes out utterly miserable.

Loki won't apologize. It's not his way. He kisses Tony's temple, a cold brush of lips that makes Tony feel more loved than the rest of the team's paltry attempts put together, and says,

"It is your decision. You know my opinion on the matter." And that's kind of an apology in itself.

"Can I decide later?" Tony asks wearily, closing his eyes.

"Of course." Loki pauses. "Do you want pleasant dreams tonight?"

"Please," Tony whispers, and feels Loki's hand slide down to settle possessively across his heart.

End Notes

No, I can't recommend any of the fics I talked about. Stop asking.

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